Performing Northern Ireland after Brexit

Citation for published version:
https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X23000234

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1017/S0266464X23000234

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
New theatre quarterly

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
Hannah Simpson

Performing Northern Ireland after Brexit: Stephen Rea in David Ireland’s *Cyprus Avenue* and Clare Dwyer Hogg’s *Hard Border*

If all national identity is performative, the Northern Irish national identity offers a particularly pronounced model of this performative instability. Such precarity was emphasised when the 2016 UK-EU ‘Brexit’ referendum raised contentious questions over Northern Irish citizenship. This article explores how two recent Northern Irish performance pieces, David Ireland’s *Cyprus Avenue* (2016) and Clare Dwyer Hogg’s *Hard Border* (2018), probe the unsettled plurality of Northern Irish national identity through the casting of actor Stephen Rea in their respective central roles. Rea’s own personal and professional history, as a figure inflected in the public mind with an extreme range of potential ‘Northern Irish identities’, encapsulates the shifting boundaries of an unstable, performative spectrum of ethno-national selfhood. This article explores how the lingering memories of Rea’s on- and offstage past offer a fittingly multi-layered, even contradictory, representation of contemporary Northern Irish identity.


**Key terms:** Northern Irish, nationality, nation, politics, celebrity, ghosting, theatre, performance-poem

Although the worst violence of the Troubles has ended, the Northern Irish national identity remains a profoundly contested entity. The resident of Northern Ireland might consider themselves British, Irish, Northern Irish, or from Ulster; this identity might be inflected with Unionist or Nationalist political feeling, or may stem from a purely personal sense of self.
The fluidity of Northern Irish national identity has been legally enshrined since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which declared ‘the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish, or British, or both, as they may so choose’.

This is, then, a space of markedly equivocal identity formation, and yet the shifting boundaries of claimed national community are often of critical cultural, political, legal, or personal significance. During the worst period of civil violence, individuals identified by paramilitary or guerrilla groups as being from the ‘wrong’ or opposing end of the ethno-national spectrum risked extreme injury or death; at a broader legal-political level, political groups such as the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin continue to vie for formal representation as ‘British’ or ‘Irish’.

Unsurprisingly then, within this precarious field of meaning, ethno-national identity is often assiduously ‘performed’, in Judith Butler’s sense of the performative: an unstable phenomenon that is produced only by continued ‘doing’, a self-sustaining practice that must be constantly reiterated in order to remain in existence. Sports, commemorative parades, respective national holidays all act as fields of implicit self-identification: hockey or hurling? Rangers or Celtic? St Patrick’s Day or the Twelfth? Linguistic choices are loaded: Do you refer to Ulster, the province, the six counties, the North, the Free State, the mainland? Do you say Derry, Londonderry – or Derry-slash-Londonderry?

In this context of precarious performative identity, theatrical performance offers a particular apposite medium for exploring resurgent questions of national self-understanding. In the wake of the 2016 UK-EU ‘Brexit’ referendum and the challenges it poses to life in Northern Ireland – threatening the right to both British and Irish citizenship, raising the spectre of a new hard border with Ireland, and provoking renewed sectarian restiveness – the Northern Irish theatre and performance scene has turned generatively to dramatic performance as a means of self-interrogation and expression. This article examines how two
recent Northern Irish performance pieces, David Ireland’s stage play Cyprus Avenue (2016) and Clare Dwyer Hogg’s performance-poem Hard Border (2018), spotlight crises of national identity at a time when Brexit negotiations are raising contentious questions over Northern Irish citizenship.4

Both Cyprus Avenue and Hard Border probe these crises of national identity through the casting of Northern Irish actor Stephen Rea in their central roles. Rea’s own personal and professional history has inscribed him in the public imagination with a particularly extreme range of potential ‘Northern Irish identities’ extending across the Unionist/Republican divide: peace-seeking co-founder of the Field Day Theatre company, husband of an IRA terrorist, West End theatre actor, and television and film voice of nationalist paramilitary figures. In Cyprus Avenue and Hard Border, Rea’s figure dynamically, and at times troublingly, personifies the shifting boundaries of an unstable, performative spectrum of ethno-national selfhood in Northern Ireland. Drawing on Marvin Carlson’s theory of theatrical ghosting to offer a case study of modern celebrity performance, this article explores how the lingering memories of Rea’s on- and offstage past conjure up a fittingly destabilised, even contradictory evocation of contemporary Northern Irish identity at a time of renewed national crisis – haunted by the ghosts of the past, and troubled by the spectre of the future.

**Northern Irish Identity and Brexit**

Ireland’s Cyprus Avenue and Dwyer Hogg’s Hard Border explore the shifting grounds of Northern Irish identity at a time of renewed political upheaval. Cyprus Avenue sees Belfast Loyalist Eric Miller, played by Rea, undergo a profound identity crisis when he comes to believe that ‘Gerry Adams has disguised himself as a new-born baby and successfully infiltrated my family home’ in the guise of his infant granddaughter.5 This psychotic
hallucination tips an already unstable Eric – long paranoid that the Ulster Loyalist identity is disintegrating in a post-GFA Belfast – into violent and eventually fatal defensive hysteria: ‘I cannot have Fenians in our house, Bernie. And I will not tolerate them in our family. […] As a family and as a people, as a nation, we are under siege. You know that too, Bern. We must protect what we have’.6

The play was first performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin before transferring to the Royal Court Theatre in London, touring to Belfast and New York, and eventually returning to the Royal Court in 2019. Ireland recalls how, when the Abbey Theatre first commissioned his play, his starting point in working for ‘the national theatre of Ireland’ was the question, ‘Am I Irish?’7 During its 2016 and 2019 production runs, however, wider political events amplified the play’s probing of the stability of the Northern Irish identity itself. Although ‘the union [between Northern Ireland and Britain] didn’t feel like a big subject’ when he first drafted the play in 2012, Ireland admits, he recognises the play’s new relevance in a period that has seen not only the Brexit referendum, but also the collapse of devolved power-sharing in the Northern Irish Assembly at Stormont, and increasing discussion of a new ‘border poll’ referendum to legislate on the possibility of reunifying the island of Ireland.8 The latter would see the legal fact of Northern Irish national identity disappear entirely.9

Dwyer Hogg’s Hard Border is still more explicitly concerned with Northern Irish national identity in the wake of Brexit, particularly the question of the ‘Irish backstop’ appendix to the Brexit withdrawal agreement that would re-install a securitised ‘hard border’ between Ireland and Northern Ireland, revising the conditions of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and potentially reinflaming divisive sectarian violence. Spoken by Rea, the performance-poem was filmed at various points along the ‘invisible’ border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and was released via the Financial Times website in September 2018, under the headline ‘Brexit: A Cry from the Irish Border’.10 Performing the poem
directly to camera, Rea pleads for the peace-seeking Northern Irish public, haranguing British political figures Jacob Rees-Mogg, Boris Johnson and Toby Young over their cavalier treatment of the Irish border and their disregard for the Good Friday Agreement in Brexit negotiations. By turns lyrically incantatory and sharply accusatory, Rea evokes the simultaneous reality and invisibility of the Irish-Northern Irish border, and the threat of its very concrete reappearance under Brexit bargaining:

And there was magic, too, in 1998 / A very good Friday / And all the years in between to make the border disappear. […] Nobody ever thought that dismantling the barricades / Like a jigsaw, bit by bit / Was a temporary measure / We thought concrete was broken down.

Throughout *Hard Border*, Rea-as-narrator aligns the tenuous performativity of Northern Irish national identity with the similar imagined-into-being construction (and reconstruction) of national border lines. If the post-GFA soft border was ‘there, but not there / A line of imagination that needed imagination to make it exist’, so too does national identity demand the labour of imagination – and imaginative performance. ‘Isn’t identity something to do with magic? […] Another imagination given credence by ritual’, Rea asks. ‘That’s why the language woven through negotiation / Has a mystical thread / […] The power of identity infusing and confusing practicality’. In an article published two months after *Hard Border* was released, Dwyer Hogg clarified her own grim fascination with this question of how ‘the power of identity’ was ‘infusing and confusing practicality’ in ethno-national identity politics in a post-Brexit Northern Ireland:

Sometimes English friends haven’t realised that when you grow up here, you can choose an Irish passport, a British passport – or both. A passport is a weighty sign. But what happens to cultural signifiers when you align yourself to them for expediency? One of the more interesting phenomena of Brexit for me has been the application for Irish passports by people of Unionist persuasion. The pragmatism of
being European trumps the thorny issue of being Northern Irish over Irish. Semantics run deep. Except when they interfere with real life.\textsuperscript{11}

Questions over the citizenship status of Northern Irish residents were brought into particularly sharp new focus during the five-year legal battle of Derry resident Emma DeSouza, who applied as an Irish citizen in 2015 for residency for her US-born husband. DeSouza has lived in Northern Ireland under an Irish passport for her entire life. The Home Office rejected the couple’s application, stating that they considered DeSouza to be British, and asking that she either reapply as a British citizen or formally renounce her British citizenship and pay to reapply as an Irish citizen. DeSouza countered that she could not renounce a citizenship she had never held, and began a lengthy battle to have the dual citizenship rights of Northern Irish residents formally recognised in British law.\textsuperscript{12} These sudden legal uncertainties of claimed national identity echoes in reverse Eric’s confession in \textit{Cyprus Avenue} that he’s ‘worried that he might be Irish’, despite his loyalist history: And then I thought the most terrifying thought of all. Maybe I am Irish. But I can’t be! I can’t suddenly be Irish any more than I can suddenly be French! And then I thought – maybe I’ve always been Irish.'\textsuperscript{13} In a political landscape in which even a government-issued passport does not guarantee national identity, Eric’s anxiety about his determinedly performed Unionist selfhood finds marked parallels outside the auditorium. As Dwyer Hogg affirms:

\[T]\text{his is what happens when political agreements have to be brought into being through language. Even words tied to pages with threads of legislation and the weight of law had to be imagined once. This is the problem – we cannot get the agreement on to paper, as one group of people disavows the other group’s imagination.}\textsuperscript{14}\]

Dwyer Hogg traces the clash between the performative fluidity of the individual’s understanding of their own national identity and the more obdurate inscription of such identities in legal bureaucracy: ‘the words in documents that will determine what and when’,
as *Hard Border* has it. At a moment of re-intensified political turmoil, when Brexit negotiations were accentuating the precariously plural and performative nature of Northern Irish national selfhood, *Cyprus Avenue* and *Hard Border* stressed the high stakes of personal and political identity – and of continued hard-won peace – in Northern Ireland.

**A Figure of Flux: Stephen Rea**

Crucial to staging this flux of national identity in both performances is the central figure of actor Stephen Rea, who played the protagonist Eric Miller in the 2016 and 2019 runs of Ireland’s *Cyprus Avenue* and the narrator of the filmed performance of Dwyer Hogg’s *Hard Border*. A theatre and film actor of considerable standing, Rea is an East Belfast Protestant by birth. Along with liberal Irish Nationalist playwright Brian Friel, he was a founding member of the Derry-based Field Day Theatre Company in 1980, which strove to transcend political faction in Troubles-riven Northern Irish theatre by finding ‘some means of celebrating the best of the Northern Protestant tradition’\(^{15}\) – even if, as Marilynn Richtarik puts it, this meant pushing Northern Protestants to ‘recognize that, in some ways at least, they were Irish themselves’,\(^ {16}\) echoing Ireland’s own self-interrogation, ‘Am I Irish?’ Journalist Sean O’Hagan recently emphasised Rea’s liberal political identity, describing him as ‘that rare thing: an Ulster Protestant with progressive socialist ideals that include a belief in a united Ireland’.\(^ {17}\) Yet one of Rea’s most widely broadcast public performances was in a markedly more politically divisive context: as the television dub voice of Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams during the 1988-94 BBC broadcasting ban on the voices of several political groups involved in the Northern Irish Troubles.

As historian Patrick Radden Keefe explains, by the late 1980s, the controversial Republican politician Adams ‘had become a hate figure in England. With his unnerving calm
and his baritone erudition, he was a deeply polarising and palpably dangerous figure: a righteous, charismatic, eloquent apologist for terrorism’. Fearful of ‘his powers of ideological seduction’, the British government censored his voice: ‘The face was recognisably Adams, and the words were his words, but the voice saying them would belong to someone else’. In some cases, that voice was Rea’s – that same voice that, in *Cyprus Avenue*, will vocalise Eric Miller’s accusing his baby granddaughter of being ‘that dirty aul’ Fenian fucker Gerry Adams’, and will again harangue Westminster politicians in *Hard Border*.

Rea is also widely associated in the public mind with another particularly extremist iteration of the contested Northern Irish identity: the husband of Provisional IRA bomber Dolours Price. Price worked with Gerry Adams in the early 1970s on plans to firebomb England and, as the Boston College tapes recently revealed, was instrumental in the IRA ‘disappearing’ of mother-of-ten Jean McConville in December 1972. In March the following year, she would participate in the Old Bailey car bombing, which led to over two hundred casualties and Price being sentenced to life imprisonment in HMP Brixton. In a bizarre aligning of life and art, on the evening before the Old Bailey bombing, Price visited the Royal Court Theatre in London to watch Friel’s new work *The Freedom of the City* which, loosely inspired by the Bloody Sunday massacre, sees three unarmed citizen protesters shot by British forces – and, on the night that Price attended, Stephen Rea was playing one of the protestors. Having known each other previously at Queen’s University Belfast, Price and Rea would reconnect after her release from prison following the Old Bailey bombing, and were married from 1983 to 2003; Price toured with Rea during his work with the Field Day theatre company, eventually moving to Maida Vale in London to live with him.

The couple’s relationship was the subject of protracted media scrutiny as a result of both Rea’s and Price’s celebrity standing. Following his success with Field Day Theatre, Rea

In turn, Price and her sister Marian had attracted intense media attention following the Old Bailey bombing. As the first widely known female members of the Provisional IRA, and as young and attractive women, they were presented in the press as a glamorously deadly spectacle – ‘the Sisters of Terror’ or ‘bomb girls’ often photographed in 1970s miniskirts – gaining a popular notoriety as symbols of ‘radical chic’. Following their imprisonment, the sisters’ 208-day hunger strike and Price’s eventual compassionate release in April 1981 continued their fame, as would Price’s campaigning for Gerry Adams when he entered parliamentary politics in 1983. Price continued to attract media attention throughout the rest of her life, photographed for the prominent Italian magazine *L’Europeo* (Figure 1), and snapped by Sunday Times paparazzi sipping champagne with Rea at the National Theatre. When she died in 2013, the *New York Times* ran her obituary. Rea was inevitably connected in the public mind with his infamous wife even after their divorce; indeed, when Price died, most mainstream English media outlets led reports of Price’s funeral with images of Rea carrying her coffin.

In theatre performance, then, Rea evokes a particularly unstable multi-layering of ‘Northern Irish identity’. On one hand, he has been aligned in the public imagination with a
notorious brand of Republican terrorism as a result of his Adams voiceover work and marriage to the paramilitary Price, by a career spent playing IRA men in films like *The Crying Game* and *The Break*. On the other hand, this association with dissident Republicanism coexists alongside his persona as an East Belfast Protestant actor with professional affiliations to the peace-seeking Field Day Theatre Company and liberal Nationalist Brian Friel, and alongside Rea’s own distinctly Anglicised bohemian life in Maida Vale and West End London theatre. It is precisely this fluidity of Rea’s public and professional identity that animates his appearance as Eric Miller in *Cyprus Avenue* and as narrator in *Hard Border*. Both roles play directly on Rea’s own mutable ethno-national associations, capitalising on how Rea’s public persona inflects our understanding of his performance, rather than trying to neutralise it.

Drama theorist Martin Puchner has highlighted how the theatre’s dependence on the actor’s own body can problematise the quest for untrammelled mimesis, when the spectator cannot readily distinguish between the actor’s and the character’s identity, or when the actor’s own public persona blurs with their performance of another character. Marvin Carlson extends this concept into a spectrally-inflected reading of the actor’s body, which is particularly appropriate to our context here, by way of his theory of theatrical ‘ghosting’ whereby the spectators encounters something they have known before, and both past and present experiences blur together in the process of reception. Instead of theorising the actor’s body ‘as a more or less transparent vehicle’ for the delivery of the playtext – one in which our recognition of the actor is immediately and entirely replaced by the scripted character – Carlson’s ‘ghosting’ recognises the entangled interaction of past and previous roles in audience reception:

The recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impression whatever on the audience, a phenomenon that often
colours and indeed may dominate the reception process. [...] Every new performance of these roles will be ghosted by a theatrical recollection of the previous performances, so that audience reception of each new performance is conditioned by inevitable memories of this actor playing similar roles in the past.  

There is a generative ghosting in Rea’s appearances in *Cyprus Avenue* and *Hard Border*. For the spectator who recognises him from past roles and/or his personal life, Rea becomes a ‘haunted body’ in performance, spectrally steeped in various iterations of the Northern Irish identity: British, Irish, Northern Irish, Unionist, Republican, peace-seeker, political player, artist. Indeed, *Cyprus Avenue*’s discussion of celebrity status applies to Rea almost as much as it does to Gerry Adams himself: ‘In the times we live in celebrity carries a great deal of symbolism’, Eric observes; the celebrity persona is ‘not just a person but the idea of a person’, another character agrees. The public ‘idea’ of Rea, as a figure imaginatively inscribed with various competing renderings of Northern Irish identity, becomes a ‘repository of cultural memory’ in Carlson’s terms, or a ‘living quote’, in Rosette C. Lamont’s: an intertextual palimpsest of conflicting variants of the national selfhood. Conjuring up these ghosted memories in a particularly slippery, multi-layered form of ghosting, Rea’s performances evoke the entangled presences of multiple historical and contemporary national identities, resurrected – partially, spectrally, precariously – in one figure.

‘She’ll be nothing?’: Performing Unstable Identity

*Cyprus Avenue* and *Hard Border* make pointed use of Rea’s ‘ghosting’ presence to evoke a plural national identity. Both central roles were created with Rea himself in mind, following Ireland and Dwyer Hogg’s earlier work with the actor-director. Rea directed and performed in two earlier stage plays by Ireland (*Half a Glass of Water*) and Dwyer Hogg (*Farewell*) in a double bill for the Field Day theatre company in Derry in December 2012. Following this
collaboration, Ireland approached Rea with what he called the ‘good fun’ of doing ‘a loyalist play at the Abbey’ when he was commissioned to write *Cyprus Avenue*. Rea has confirmed that Ireland wrote the role of Eric Miller specifically for him: ‘It’s supposed to be done in my voice, that Northern voice’.\(^{31}\) There is a generative irony here in the one-time voice of Republican politician Gerry Adams being recast as the specifically ‘Northern voice’ tormented by the spectre of this very politician. While Rea emphasises that he never tried to ‘embody’ or impersonate Adams when voicing him on BBC broadcast, speaking ‘as clearly and as neutrally as I could’ and ‘hoping to provide a conduit’ to Adams’s message, he is no longer likely to embody any such neutrality in performance.\(^ {32}\) Any ‘conduit’ he provides to a scripted text dealing specifically with Northern Irish politics will almost inevitably be pervaded by his own recognisable personal and professional history: ‘the power of identity infusing and confusing practicality’, as *Hard Border* puts it. If *Cyprus Avenue* offers ‘the theatrical embodiment of a kind of debilitating identity politics’, as Connal Parr observes, Rea himself personifies a particularly tumultuous version of competing Northern Irish identities and identity politics.\(^ {33}\)

Indeed, in his old age Rea has achieved precisely the status of ‘éminence grise, aging philosopher-king’ that *Cyprus Avenue* assigns to Adams himself.\(^ {34}\) And if Ireland built on Rea’s ‘Northern voice’ for *Cyprus Avenue*, Rea’s appearance in *Hard Border* likewise draws directly on his status as a prominent ‘Northern Irish’ voice. Here, grizzled, bitterly dignified, ‘knee-deep in philosophy’ (Figure 2), the gravity of Rea’s immediately recognisable onscreen presence helps realise the impact of Dwyer Hogg’s performance-poem. Rea sneers the names of English political figures, and looks pointedly, complicitly, to camera to underline moments of particular political ignorance. The performance is shot against a backdrop of Northern Irish rural roads and border towns, and is inflected by distinctive Northern Irish speech patterns: ‘But now, sure’; ‘There’s a lot of chat about imagination’; ‘Boris Johnson took a notion’. The
poem performed by a non-Northern Irish figure would lose much of its meaning. Rea is thus framed onscreen as at once recognisably himself and, simultaneously, a representative for a broader Northern Irish populace.

There are few other human figures visible throughout the recording. When Rea speaks of the ‘day-to-day’ magic of life in a post-GFA nation – ‘The spirit of peace in the normality [...] A gentleness in the mundanity. / Daily travel across political lines, / Work, school, grocery shops / Back again’. We see brief shots of men, women and children going about their daily lives; neighbouring women talking on the pavement with mugs and cigarette; men sitting outside a small pub; children running down the road. But their faces are always partly or fully turned away from the camera, or far enough in the background of the shot so that individual features are obscured. Rea speaks for an imagined populace, a ‘conduit’ for the common-sense voice of an imagined common ‘we’ ‘here’ speaking against ‘the people in power and the people that write about us’. He must be both himself and yet stand for others; he must be a recognisably Northern Irish presence in the poem, while signifying the plurality of contemporary Northern Irish identity.

Figure 2 here.

Hard Border emphasises the value of this plural national identity: ‘Where are the stereotypes here when some of us have Irish passports, some British, some have both?’ the script demands. Irish writer Fintan O’Toole’s defence of the ‘imaginative brilliance’ of the Good Friday Agreement during Brexit negotiations echo this celebration of the fluid multiplicity of modern Northern Irish identity:

The Good Friday gamble was that people could live with complexity, contingency, ambiguity. [...] At the core of the agreement is its statement that people born in
Northern Ireland have an absolute right to be ‘Irish or British or both as they may so choose’. We have here, written down in a binding international treaty, a recognition that national identity is not a territorial or genetic imperative, and is not necessarily a single thing. It is chosen, and therefore open to a change of mind. And it can be multiple: those six letters – ‘or both’ – are the glory of the agreement, its promise and its challenge.\(^{35}\)

O’Toole highlights the strength contained within the fluid performativity of the post-GFA Northern Irish identity, where precarity is also plurality, and indeterminacy is also choice.\(^{36}\) If there is a seeming paradox in a single figure performing this plurality of identity, the specific casting of Rea negates this paradox. The potent onscreen combination of Rea’s recognisable identity as a Northern Irish citizen, held in tension with the various competing iterations of ethno-national identity that his professional career and personal life evoke, mirrors and magnifies the indeterminate fluidity of Northern Irish selfhood of which *Hard Border* speaks.

However, although *Hard Border* emphasises the value of the ‘complexity, contingency, [and] ambiguity’ of the multiform Northern Irish identity, it also highlights its attendant vulnerability. Following Brexit, not only the post-ceasefire plurality of Northern Irish identity is under threat, but also the very existence of Northern Irish identity itself – both politically, by way of the border referendum that could see Northern Irish identity erased altogether, and more literally, by dint of the renewed sectarian restiveness catalysed by Brexit negotiations. The performance-poem traces how these debates have roused the only partially-laid-to-rest ghosts of the Troubles, provoking a new wave of sectarian violence epitomised for many by the tragic death of young Belfast journalist Lyra McKee, fatally shot by dissident gunmen during rioting in Derry in April 2019. In this sense, Carlson’s ‘ghostly quality, this sense of something coming back’ as it operates in *Hard Border* is also the uneasy resurrection of Northern Ireland’s turbulent past, reawakened by Brexit negotiations.\(^{37}\)

The ghosting of Rea’s past roles in conflict-related theatre and film and television, and his association with Republican action via Adams and Price, re-animates the spectral
return of past conflict in Rea’s onscreen presence. Carlson describes ghosting as ‘the past reappearing unexpectedly and uncannily in the midst of the present’; Dwyer Hogg’s poem plays very literally with this ghosting affect as it articulates the fragility of a cross-border peace that relies upon imaginative coalescence, the joint agreement of thought that will make a border appear, disappear, and reappear according to collective will. Early in the recording, old footage of border checkpoint searches – ‘Donegal, Derry’ – are projected onto the river’s surface. Later, images of open warfare play out against the bus shelter in which Rea is sitting (Figure 3). A soldier raises his gun, a vehicle burns: these spectral figures move menacingly, indistinctly, behind Rea as he speaks of ‘war, that vulture who makes human lives carrion, / Tears the beauty of identity to pieces / Feasts on death’ (Figure 4). Rea himself moves through this landscape like an avenging revenant. In his first appearance following the title slide, he advances on the camera accusatorily, slightly hunched, speaking caustically to Westminster politicians of their disregard for the Northern Irish situation: ‘And because you do not like to think it’s a problem / Does not mean it vanishes / A trick of the eye’. His silhouette walks along the bottom of the screen, doubled moments later by a paler ghostly silhouette superimposed at the top of the screen in the opposite direction, as his spectral voiceover retraces the simultaneously intangible yet very real problem of the national border identity: ‘Magical thinking. / An imaginary problem. / A pragmatic extension of a reality that already exists’ (Figure 5). The multiple versions of both Rea and Northern Irish history ghost this production, looking (and walking) both backwards and forwards – backwards to the ghosts of old violence, and forward to the spectre of new uncertainties. The periodic reminders of ghostly forms in this otherwise solid rural landscape echo the precarity of national existence under the weight of ‘the documents that will determine what and when’. ‘We live here’, Rea intones in the poem’s closing moments, standing below a newly dark sky, ‘and we’re holding our breath again. / Because we know that chance and hope / come in
forms like steam and smoke’. As the minor-key backing music swells to a grim crescendo, the flimsy ephemerality of ‘steam’ shifts to the equally amorphous but more sinister ‘smoke’ of renewed destruction. Rea’s dark ghosting in *Hard Border* bespeaks the risk as well as the opportunity encompassed in an unsettled national identity: a ghostly portent, erupting from a disrupted past to warn of future woe.

*Figure 3 here*

*Figure 4 here*

*Figure 5 here*

*Cyprus Avenue* similarly, and still more fatalistically, interrogates Northern Irish national identity as alarmingly performative and consequently precarious, still ghosted by the past. Eric’s Unionist British identity depends on a series of dogged assertions based on a fixed state of essentialised ‘being’: ‘I am anything but Irish. I am British. I am exclusively and non-negotiably British. I am not nor never have been nor never will be Irish’, he declares in the play’s first scene.39 The Northern Irish identity is here forged by dint of careful exclusion, the ‘is’ or ‘am’ determined by the negation of that which it is *not*, ‘nor have been nor never will be’.

Over the course of the play, this quality of exclusionary negation loses its stabilising force for Eric, ‘is’ and ‘am’ no longer a mark of essentialised, self-evident certainty: ‘It also occurred to me that perhaps I wasn’t a Protestant. I mean, of course I am. I am a Protestant. In the sense of not being Catholic. But what is a Protestant? What does any of it even mean?’40 Eric’s anxiety about his national identity is triggered in part by his trip to London, where he encounters an easy celebration and appropriation of the Irish identity: ‘All these
men are English! All these Irishmen walking in and out of this pub! Every single one of them is English! They go to England for a hundred years and call themselves Irish and we go to Ireland for four hundred years and call ourselves British! In Eric’s anxiety, the certainty of ‘is’ shifts to the fluidity of ‘call ourselves’ as he comes to recognise the instability of ethno-national identification.

Even Slim, the violent loyalist paramilitary who threatens to kill Eric for wondering aloud in public about the stability of his British Protestant identity, and who may or may not be a ghostly hallucination generated by Eric’s own repressed political anxiety, acknowledges the scope for the selective performance of competing national identifications. He remarks:

For what it’s worth, I myself think that there is an Irish dimension to loyalist identity. It’s inescapable but it’s certainly not predominant, if you know what I mean. I consider myself to a certain extent Irish but that doesn’t necessarily mean I’m gonna stick a Guinness hat on and march about the streets on St Patrick’s Day.

In blackly comic style, the paramilitary ready to shoot Eric for ‘beginning to question the validity of loyalist cultural identity’ concedes that the distinction between ethno-national identities might be so fine a line as to be merely the choice of various modes of public performativity. (Does one don a Guinness hat on St Patrick’s Day or not?) Elsewhere, Eric’s memory of drinking in an Irish pub in London provides another very literal example of fused ethno-national performatives: ‘At one point, I think I sang “Soldier of the UVF” to the tune of “Spancil Hill”. I don’t think he noticed’. Blending an aggressive loyalist anthem with a traditional Irish folk ballad, the moment exemplifies the unstable interweaving of ostensibly conflicting ethno-national identities that Eric so fears.

Slim’s very presence onstage continues this troubling destabilising of sectarian-inflected identity, furnishing a physical manifestation of Rea’s past association with dissident
republicanism, jarringly – and pointedly – reversed.45 Played by actor Chris Corrigan, Slim appears as a boilerplate stereotype of the Northern Irish paramilitary, dressed in the requisite black leather jacket, with shaved head and handgun (Figure 6). Facing Corrigan onstage, Rea stands before the now-embodied ghost of his own on- and offstage paramilitary associations. There is a ‘particularly close relationship between ghosting and parody’, Carlson suggests, and Cyprus Avenue plays mordantly in this middle ground.46 Rea faces a caricaturised version of the darkly theatrical performativity of dissident sectarianism – an idea that Rea’s own celebrity has helped to fix in the public mind.

There is a further absurd comedy in the sheer proliferation of competing ethno-national associations that jostle for room on the stage at this point. Spectral traces of Gerry Adam, Dolours Price, The Freedom of the City and The Crying Game hover alongside the playtext’s loyalist context. Cyprus Avenue sardonically fuses the extreme ends of Northern Ireland’s ethno-national political spectrum, where IRA merges with UVF, in both abstract and physicalised form on stage. Cyprus Avenue ostensibly stages a strictly bounded vision of unionist identity, but other ethno-national elements haunt the stage in an apt formal echo of the indelibly interwoven existence of multiple ethno-national identities in Northern Irish life.

As Eric tries desperately to cling to the stable boundaries of his British loyalist identity, he slips further into the ontological muddle of imbricated ethno-national identities, but his recognition of the soft borders of identity prompts a murderous chaos rather than acceptance or reconciliation. An identity determined by what it is ‘not’, as Eric articulates his own brand of Unionist loyalism, quickly dissipates into ‘nothing’ when hermetic sectarian boundaries begin to disintegrate. Eric’s daughter Julie offers an alternative reading of an
identity based on ‘nothing’ that, to her, offers a space of progressive, welcoming social
liberty, but to Eric represents only a vacuum, a cultural and political death:

ERIC: Is she a Unionist or a Republican?
JULIE: She’s neither! She’s a little baby!
ERIC: Will you raise her as a Unionist or a Republican?
JULIE: I’ll raise her as nothing. I’ll raise her to respect all people and not judge a
person on their religion or their race.
ERIC: You’ll raise her as nothing! She’ll be nothing?!
JULIE: She’ll not be prejudiced.
ERIC: Without prejudice we’re nothing! If we don’t discriminate, we don’t survive!47

Eric’s own sense of ethno-national identity, dependent on performative reiteration and
defined by what it is not, is constructed around a central nothingness. Ireland’s play traces the
transmutation of this ‘nothingness’ into an orgy of destruction and self-destruction, as Eric
tries desperately to shield himself from recognition of the negatory void at the heart of his
national self-conception. Eric’s first word in the play is a tentative ‘Yes’, but his last word is
‘No’, as he laughs in response to his therapist’s suggestion that he might reconsider the
significance of his murder of his family. ‘I’d forgotten how much I enjoy saying no’, he tells
her, echoing Ian Paisley’s notorious iteration, ‘Ulster says no’, slogan of Unionist protest
against the inclusion of the Republic of Ireland in devolved Northern Irish government.
‘Ulster says no’, Slim tells Eric as he presses the gun to his mouth, moments before turning it
on himself. ‘No no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no’, Eric
howls as he turns murderously on his daughter.48 The central absence at the heart of the
precarious, performative national identity is made spectrally present onstage through these
determined negations of what that identity is ‘not’. Cyprus Avenue emphasises the instability
of national identity as a source of anxiety, of frightening and potentially lethal volatility,
rather than revelling in any postmodern liberty of choice accorded by performative being.
Conclusion

If it is always difficult to represent so ambiguous a phenomenon as national identity on a bounded stage space – let alone one so contested and precarious as the Northern Irish identity – Rea’s ghosting onstage figure works fluently to this end. Rea’s representational currency in the public eye is appropriately fluid, informed by competing understandings and iterations of what the Northern Irish identity might ‘be’: an East Belfast Protestant performing the voice of Gerry Adams; married to an IRA terrorist while leading a bohemian actor’s life in Maida Vale; itinerant resident of Ireland, Northern Ireland and England turn by turn, and professionally aligned with Dublin’s Abbey Theatre, Derry’s Field Day Theatre Company, and London’s Royal Court; playing victimised civilian, soulful IRA gunman, a voice of reason for peace, and psychotic Unionist across his career.

Employing Rea to evoke both the plurality and the past-haunted quality of Northern Irish selfhood, Cyprus Avenue and Hard Border demonstrate the power of theatrical performance, and of certain forms of what we might call ‘celebrity casting’, as a vehicle for embodying the varying shades of national identity. At a historical moment of resurgent anxiety regarding the relative legal and political stability of the Northern Irish identity, when ongoing Brexit negotiations and the British government’s apparent disregard for the terms of the Good Friday Agreement seemed poised to topple hard-won ideas of national selfhood, Hard Border and Cyprus Avenue played directly on central performer Stephen Rea’s own mutable ethno-national associations in wider public perception. In doing so, they encapsulate the precarity of a collective existence dependent on repeated performative construction: ‘another imagination given credence by ritual’, as Rea intones in Hard Border.

Cyprus Avenue and Hard Border also testify to a dynamic drive in the Northern Irish performance scene to interrogate contemporary questions of national identity, belonging and
exclusion. If the Northern Irish performance scene has too often been viewed as ‘the forgotten branch of British and Irish theatre, fully integrated neither into the Irish Republic’s scene […] nor into the British theatre scene’, a more generative critical lens might now read Northern Irish theatre on its own terms, engaging with its own specific questions of national selfhood.⁴⁹ And if several English commentators still believe that British theatre ‘has its head in the sand over Brexit’,⁵⁰ they might do well to look to the Northern Irish theatre scene, and to its ongoing exploration of ethno-national identity – and of the dangers of any enforced inflexibility of that identity.

With thanks to Liam Harrison for his support of an early draft of this article, to Patrick Radden Keefe for his generous help in tracing image permissions, and to Maria Shevtsova for editorial guidance.

¹ The Northern Irish Peace Agreement (The Good Friday Agreement), United Nations Peacemaker, 10 April 1998, p.3. Available at https://peacemaker.un.org/uk-ireland-good-friday98. The GFA referendum brought a formal end to the violent civil conflict popularly known as ‘the Troubles’ that raged in Northern Ireland across the twentieth century, as Republican paramilitary forces fought to expel British occupying troops from the region, and Loyalist forces fought to maintain Northern Ireland’s union with Great Britain rather than join the island as a united Ireland.


³ ‘Claire Mitchell has written affectionately about […] the way that people today, suspecting that someone is one of ‘the other sort’, go out of their way to let them know that it does not trouble them. “The guy who cuts our trees thinks we’re Catholic, as we send our kids to the local Catholic school. […] We think he’s Protestant, because of his name and the fact that we live in a majority Protestant area. Last week, I was surprised to hear my husband drop a ‘Londonderry’ into the conversation – I assume to make the tree guy comfortable. And the tree guy comes back with a sentence containing five ‘Derrys’ – quite an achievement – to signal back that all is well. This is Northern Ireland to me. The gentle, intricate and generous negotiation of difference. Using language, humour, silence – or whatever we need – to navigate the situation. Most of us do this on a daily basis. We’re pretty good at it.’’ Susan McKay, Northern Protestant on Shifting Ground, The Blackstaff Press, 2021, 333.


⁵ David Ireland, Cyprus Avenue, London: Methuen, 2019, 52. Ireland’s plays frequently take the topic of unstable or contested Northern Irish identity as a focal point, as for example in Yes So I Said Yes (2011) and Not Now (2022), and with explicit reference to the ‘Brexit’ vote in Ulster American (2018).

⁶ Ireland, 27.


⁸ Ireland interviewed by Lawson, 2019.

⁹ The economic disadvantages imposed on Northern Ireland by withdrawing from the EU, alongside the resentment of being forced to withdraw despite the province itself having voted to remain, have heightened the possibility of a referendum vote for a reunification with Ireland. See Rory Carroll, ‘It’s closer now than it’s ever
been’: Could There Soon be a United Ireland?’, The Guardian, 6 October 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/10/06/its-closer-now-than-its-ever-been-could-there-soon-be-a-united-ireland

10At time of writing, the performance-poem is still hosted on the Financial Times website. Clare Dwyer Hogg, ‘Brexit: A Cry from the Irish Border’, 21 September 2018, https://www.ft.com/video/33264c1e-e744-4b24-bdb7-b89b09716517; all subsequent quotations from Hard Border refer to this recording. The recording can also be viewed on the Financial Times’s YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cZe2ihEZ08/

11 Clare Dwyer Hogg, ‘Do you live in ‘Northern Ireland’ or ‘the north of Ireland’?’, Financial Times, 30 November 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/dbf23ac2-f2fc-11e8-9623-d79881e729f

12 It is estimated that, as a direct result of the British Home Office’s 2012 and 2019 changes to the United Kingdom’s immigration rules, hundreds of residents of Northern Ireland gave up their British citizenship in order to be allowed to bring their foreign-born partners into the country. For full details on the political mechanics, including a review of DeSouza’s case, see ‘Northern Ireland, Citizenship, and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement’, House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper No. 8571, 19 October 2019. Available at https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8571/CBP-8571.pdf

13 Ireland, 46, 38.

14 Dwyer Hogg, November 2018.

15 Brian Friel, letter to the new Field Day directors David Hammond, Seamus Heaney, Seamus Deane and Tom Paulin, 21 September 1981, Brian Friel Papers, National Library of Ireland (NLI), Dublin, Ireland, MS 37, 181/1.


18 Patrick Radden Keefe, Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland, London: Williams Collins, 2018, 240. Smash-hit television show Derry Girls revived the memory of the broadcasting ban in its second season in 2019, with a brief clip of a UTV newsreader explaining, ‘Because of government restrictions, we cannot broadcast the voice of Mr Adams. His words are spoken by an actor.’ ‘I will never understand the point of that’, the family’s father comments. ‘It’s because his natural voice is actually very seductive’, his sister explains. ‘Apparently he sounds like a West Belfast Bond. As far as the English are concerned, a voice like that? Well… it’s dangerous.’ ‘Just so I’m clear’, the father responds, ‘Are you saying that the British government dub the voice of Gerry Adams because it’s too sexy?’ ‘It’s like a fine whiskey’, his father-in-law concurs (‘Across the Barricades’, season 2, episode 1 of Derry Girls, created by Lisa McGee, Hat Trick Productions, 2019). David Ireland himself appeared the first season of Derry Girls as Sean Devlin.

19 Ireland, 21. Cyprus Avenue directly references the BBC broadcasting ban, when Eric VERBS his granddaughter to reveal her identity: ‘Come on, talk. Talk. There’s no broadcasting ban anymore, Gerry. You can talk as much as you want. So talk. Talk. TALK!’


21 Keefe, 134-6.

22 Keefe, 215.


28 Wallace, 99.
29 Ireland, 65.
32 Rea 2016.
34 Ireland, 17.
36 Although O’Toole does not use Butler’s terminology of the performative here, his thinking parallels theirs: Northern Irish national identity ‘is chosen, and therefore open to a change of mind’, O’Toole writes; gender ‘is constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently’. Butler theorises; 1988, 520.
37 Carlson, 2.
38 Carlson, 1.
39 Ireland, 10.
40 Ireland, 36.
41 Ireland, 39.
42 Ireland, 46.
43 Ireland, 47.
44 Ireland, 41.
45 The playtext leaves undetermined whether Slim is real or a creation of Eric’s own troubled mind; he appears onstage as a very palpable physical presence, but later Eric’s psychiatrist will insist, ‘You’re Slim. You invented Slim’, and most critics likewise read Slim as ‘the embodiment of Eric’s psychic fracture’. Ireland, 77; Wallace, 97.
46 Carlson, 71.
47 Ireland, 61.
48 Ireland 7, 78, 69, 62.