

Re-Shaping National Culture: Sean-nós Dance in Twenty-First Century Ireland

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the factors that lead to a revival of marginalized practices of national culture in the age of globalization. Previous scholarship suggests that globalization's dynamism has the ability to affect common methods used to shape national culture, leading to a resurgence of historically marginalized practices. Focusing on sean-nós dance in twenty-first century Ireland, I draw on literature that analyzes forms of Irish dance, while interweaving ethnographic research to demonstrate why the revival of sean-nós dance in the twenty first century occurred. I trace the histories of the two main dance forms in Ireland, step dance, an invented, "traditional" dance form, and sean-nós dance, the "old-style" dance, to reveal that the revival and increasing legitimization of sean-nós dance in Ireland is predicated on the continued globalization and commodification of step dance, in addition to the inclusive performance context and movements of sean-nós dance that have remained embedded in Ireland's culture. While, in part, this research shows that globalization and the actual movements within marginalized, embodied performances of national culture can contribute to their revival in the twenty-first century, many other contributing social, historical, and economic factors need to be considered.

Key words:

- National Culture
- Globalization
- Sean-nós
- Step dance
- Ireland

Preface

Prior to beginning my research on Irish dance, I was oblivious to sean-nós dance. My knowledge of Irish dance was limited to the stereotypical image of an Irish dancer, that being a woman on stage wearing a decorative dress and a large, curly wig with rigid, upright posture doing high kicks and jumps. Nevertheless, as someone who also studies dance, I was quite excited to travel to Ireland and study “traditional Irish dance”. However, once in Ireland, I quickly learned that what I understood to be “traditional Irish dance” was actually step dance and that there was this other prominent dance form called sean-nós dance, which literally translates to “old-style dance”. Up until that point, I had not recalled reading much about sean-nós dance, and when it was briefly addressed in the literature that I was reading, it was generally discussed in terms of its decline during the Potato Famine in the 1840s, the Gaelic Revival in the 1890s, and the Celtic Tiger in the 1990s. I thought it was interesting that something that was talked about so little in academic literature was an area of study at the University of Limerick in the Republic of Ireland, where I studied during the spring of 2018. After talking with students and faculty there, I learned that sean-nós dance has been experiencing a revival of sorts in the twenty-first century.

Additionally, while at the University of Limerick I was fortunate enough to take two step dance classes, a percussive dance class that incorporated sean-nós dance, a Gaelic-Irish language class that was split between learning the language and situating it within Ireland’s history, an introductory Irish music and dance lecture that aided in my understanding of perceptions on dance in Ireland and the connection that it has to music, and an Irish history course that helped me contextualize Irish dance within the nation’s overarching history. These courses all

supplemented my understanding and embodiment of Irish step dance and sean-nós dance. Once I understood the complex history of Ireland and how Irish dance, as a tool for creating national culture, has been a topic of much contention, I found the recent revival of sean-nós dance even more curious to consider.

I discovered that performing sean-nós dance was much more enjoyable than performing Irish step dance, as sean-nós dance is a very grounded, relaxed dance form. It felt so natural and easy to embody, as opposed to step dance, which involves many jumps, kicks, intricate footwork, and a rigid upper body. Sean-nós dance is also very rooted in community and serves as a social leveller; generally speaking, I am quite curious about the role of dance in relation to community formation. This personal interest, in addition to having the chance to embody both styles of dance, helped situate myself to research the revival of sean-nós dance in a nation that has experienced a great deal of conflict. I would like to thank Dr. Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain, Michael Ryan, Dr. Mats Melin, Pamela Cotter, and Dr. Stephen Ryan for helping me to embody Irish step dance and sean-nós dance, as well as to better understand the history and culture of Ireland. This research is conducted by Bridget Ryan at Denison University and was presented on December 6, 2018.

Introduction

In this paper, I examine how local performances of national culture can contribute to a sense of national culture in contemporary times. I consider the effects of globalization in the shaping of national culture and how that might affect commonly used strategies for shaping national culture. I address the significance of embodied practices of national culture and the inherent ability of movement to reinvent, create, and express culture. My case study is sean-nós

dance in Ireland. Sean-nós, which literally translates to ‘old-style’, has historically existed in rural areas in Ireland and has been associated with the past, especially during the turn of the twentieth century when step dancing was invented as tradition. However, there has been a revival of sean-nós dance as a performance of national culture in the twenty first century; I will explore the factors that have led to this revival.

Existing scholarship claims that commonly used methods for producing national culture include invented traditions, everyday actions and behaviors, and romanticizing of the rural as the ‘authentic’. Tim Edensor, in *National Identity, Popular Culture, and Everyday Life*, argues that while national culture and identity continue to remain the most powerful sources of belonging, it is important to recognize the scaling process within this, which enables us to identify connections between local, regional, and national (35). Not only that, but because of globalization, practices of national culture are continually re-embedded and re-circulated within a nation. (Brown 240; Edensor 33). While many studies consider the reconfiguration of national culture in a globalized world, few studies include embodied culture, such as dance, in the discussion of globalization and national culture reconfiguration. Nor are the movements and the performance contexts within various dance forms considered as potentially significant factors that influence how we think about the way culture functions at different levels within a nation today. My present study seeks to address these disparities.

This study examines the revival of sean-nós dance in Ireland by providing a comprehensive history of dance in Ireland and then tracking the evolution of sean-nós dance alongside the invented tradition of step dancing. I identify key embodied and performative differences between the two dance forms, which I suggest has contributed to the revival of

sean-nós dance. I argue that the revival of sean-nós dance is also predicated on the globalization of step dance, as step dance is currently experiencing the re-embedding process described by Edensor and is functioning less as a marker of national culture than it used to. Meanwhile, sean-nós dance, which historically precedes the invention of step dancing, has remained representative of an ‘authentic’ Irishness at a local and regional level. Sean-nós dance provides space for individual expression and freedom within an inclusive, communal context, which adds to the appeal of the dance form in the twenty-first century.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate one way that local performances of national culture can regain momentum when popular performances of national culture experience the effects of globalization. This paper also suggests the need to consider the movements in embodied practices of national culture as a key factor in “successfully” shaping them to serve as such. I do this by first reviewing scholarly literature on heavily relied upon methods used by nations to shape national culture: invented traditions, everyday behaviors and actions, and romanticizing the rural as a source of ‘authenticity’. I explore the effects that globalization has on these methods, and I address the significance of embodied performances of national culture. I include literature about the body and culture, as well as the ways that dance shapes perceptions of culture. I then review my methodology for considering the impact of globalization on performances of national culture, along with the significance of bodily movements within performances, by tracking the evolution of an invented tradition alongside a marginalized performance of national culture. I include ethnographic research, drawing on interviews that I conducted, as well as my personal, embodied experiences of step dance and sean-nós dance in Ireland. After examining the history and analyzing the qualities of sean-nós dance alongside step

dance, I address the results that my research yielded and suggest how my case study might serve as a basis for understanding why and how national culture is formed in an increasingly globalized world.

Literature Review

I situate my research within existing literature about commonly used methods for constructing national culture - invented traditions, everyday behaviors and activities, and the romanticization of the rural - and globalization's effects on that process. I additionally address embodied performances of national culture by discussing the relationship between bodily movement and culture, as particularly displayed through dance.

Invented Traditions

As Eric Hobsbawm asserts in *The Invention of Tradition*, traditions, which inherently claim to be situated in history, are often invented in the relatively recent past to “inoculate certain values and norms... which automatically imply continuity with the past” (1). Sophie Hohmann uses Hobsbawm to clarify conditions that lead to a tradition being invented. These conditions include brutal social change, the emergence of a new elite, and a new power that seeks to impose its own legitimacy and order (146). Thus, the invention of tradition has occurred more frequently under those conditions, especially if they weaken previous social patterns or if old traditions are no longer sufficiently adaptable (4-5). Terence Brown adds that in times of sudden change, it is often “writers and artists that are looked to for guidance on how to move forward,” that literature, music, architecture, and design are put to work in service of a nation's self-awareness and culture (245-247). These may become invented as tradition, especially in

times of social change or shifting power, as nations look to “more humanistic things” to create a sense of cultural nationalism (Brown 237).

The Everyday

There has been increasing emphasis on the impact of everyday actions, behaviors, and activities in relation to the shaping of national culture. As culture shifts with time, place, and other similar factors, it is thus “constantly in a process of becoming, of emerging out of the dynamism of popular culture and everyday life whereby people make and remake connections between the local and the national...” (Edensor vii). Hüsamettin İnaç and Feyzullah Ünal similarly assert that national culture is always in a process of becoming, as well. It combines historical struggles and daily experiences, which are then translated across a range of cultures (230). Kristin Surak uses the Japanese tea ceremony to demonstrate how national culture is performed through everyday behaviors and actions. She argues that there is an unconscious embedding that occurs through activities, which sustain prevailing national and cultural imaginings. The Japanese tea ceremony is an exceptional example for exploring how Japaneseness is produced “because it is so widely understood as archetypically Japanese” (10). Although the role of tea ceremonies is constructed to align with Zen values and culture, which is a construct in itself, this performance of everyday national culture is nonetheless applicable, as it shows how everyday movements can come to hold meaning in a nation. Other embodied, everyday practices, such as additional traditional ceremonies, dance, and parades, inscribe memory, identity, and culture into the body, thus enabling it to be used to shape national culture (Surak 10; Edensor 74). Eoin O’Malley adds to this, suggesting that arts in particular allow a

nation to reflect on itself, to develop a sense of itself, and to provide individuals with another way of understanding a society (160).

Sports do this, as well. When people play a national sport, Edensor argues that a ‘traditional’ national style is expected (79). Michael Skey and Marco Antonsich, in *Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Identity and Belonging After Banal Nationalism*, say that “feelings of national belonging emerge in moments of bodily encounters” and that bodies generate and rework national cultures through everyday performances of popularized, national activities, such as dance or sport (179-181). In “Hockey and Habitus: Sport and National Identity in Northern Ireland”, Katie Liston and Elizabeth Moreland support these claims by stating that a sense of “Ulsterness”¹ is expressed during hockey games in Northern Ireland, which stands in contrast to people who don’t play hockey, that those individuals feel tension with whether they are Ulster, British, or Irish. Liston and Moreland clarify, though, that this isn’t the case with people who quite regularly play sports, as those people feel a collective national culture through performing and participating in embodied, national activities (129-138). In *Sport, Dance and Embodied Identities*, Noel Dyke and Eduardo P. Archetti agree, that “sport...combines techniques of the body, social practices, and cultural imagination in ways that fuel the generation of embodied identities that reflect and address issues that do not necessarily begin or end on the...field of play” (15).

Desire for the ‘Authentic’ through the Rural

Similarly, rural areas of a nation can be the source of inspiration for national culture. Edensor suggests that when mentioning the name of a nation, there is often a particular rural

¹ Ulster is a northern province of Ireland, and it has six counties in Northern Ireland, constituting a large part of it.

landscape that comes to mind, generally with people performing certain actions. These rural landscapes are “loaded with symbolic values and stand for national virtues” (39-40). Appeal for rural areas also lies in the fact that rural environments have more space and are more family-oriented than their urban counterparts and are generally less aggressive because of it (Seaga 84). Eric Kaufmann and Oliver Zimmer contribute their concept of the ‘nationalism of nature’, whereby a nation “imprints its culture onto a particular landscape, rendering it familiar” (503). This ultimately leads to people desiring a sort of manufactured ‘authenticity’ of the nation, which is deeply embedded within a social and historical framework (İnaç and Ünal 224). The Swiss Alps provide an example of this, as they were constructed as a natural place for the emergence of a “pure, simple, honest, and liberty-loving character” in the eighteenth-century and still hold great significance for people in Switzerland today (Kaufmann and Zimmer 491). The rural provides other motifs for national culture besides landscapes, as well. Food, leisure activities, and literature found in rural locations can also manufacture a sense of the ‘authentic’.

In “The Palestinian Peasant as National Signifier”, Ted Swedenburg discusses how, when Israeli policies were becoming harsher and working to suppress Palestinian culture in the 1930-1940s, folk customs - music, dance, writing, food, and crafts - were used by Palestinians as a form of resistance to cross the line between the past and the present, thus creating a sense of the ‘authentic’ and securing a national, timeless culture that people could relate to (19-21). This constructed sense of what is ‘authentic’ to the nation is continually re-circulated through popular culture (Edensor 40).

Effects of Globalization

The aforementioned common methods used by nations to shape national culture throughout history can help generate a sense of understanding of how national culture is created in the twenty-first century, as well, as “far from being a relic of the nineteenth century, the cultural component of nationalist ideology has not lost its relevance” (Harris 28). However, with the emergence of globalization, national culture has become more dynamic and transitional; there is a constant reconstitution of national culture in the present day (Brown 240; Edensor 33). It continually becomes re-embedded, re-distributed, and recentered. It is through this dynamism that there is space for the revival of folk culture. It is becoming increasingly common for traditional or vernacular cultural elements, which have been historically ignored or dismissed by elitist culture, to be “reconstructed” as alternative kinds of national culture (Edensor 4).

The constant state of flux that defines national culture as a result of globalization allows for the meshing of the past and present to re-invent traditions. Ulf Hannerz, in “Scenarios for Peripheral Cultures”, supports this with his peripheral corruption scenario, in which peripheral culture, consisting of the activities and traditions that exist outside of the mainstream, popular culture, “takes its time reshaping metropolitan culture to its own specifications” (124). Hannerz contributes that cultural competence and cultural sensibility are increasingly derived from “an involvement with local forms of life” and that globalization is one of the main sources for new movements to arise in contemporary times. Thus, both local forms and globalization are factors that enable his peripheral corruption scenario to take place (116, 120). By examining medical practices in Uzbekistan in the post-Soviet era, this idea manifests itself. Sophie Hohmann reveals that there are certain doctors, who are called physicians-tabib, that combine historically

traditional practices of alternative medicine with contemporary practices. She acknowledges that the revival of alternative medicine occurred right after the collapse of the USSR, a time of drastic change, which, as articulated by Hobsbawm, is one of the conditions that cause traditions to be invented. Hohmann goes on to say that traditions in modern societies reformulate themselves in line with social change, thus reinforcing a collective need to produce national elements for a society to refer to. In the specific case of medical practices in Uzbekistan, independence after the Soviet era favored a search for national memory, resulting in the rise of the sort of hybrid practice seen today (142-147).

National Culture as an Embodied Practice

There are also scholars that have addressed the idea of embodied performances as a means of communicating various forms of culture to others. In *Performance, Embodiment and Cultural Memory*, Michelle Liu Carriger addresses the example of Japanese tea practices as one way that history and culture are created and invented through the embodied event that appears as a “tradition”. Carriger argues that “embodying and re-presenting the past through tea is a means of obtaining power within the society that values the past”, thus resulting in a sense of national culture (147). This is true for most embodied practices, as Karen Barbour reiterates this in *Dancing Across the Page: Narrative and Embodied Ways of Knowing* by suggesting that embodiment recognizes conditions of history and culture and that movement can be identified as “the originating ground of our sense-making”, which contributes to the way that national culture presents itself and how people perceive it in relation to themselves (88-89). More explicitly, Helen Thomas declares in *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory* that it is through movement

and dancing that people bear culture (78). Thomas elaborates that “dance as a topic, resource and practice gives a new perspective on cultural symbols” (88).

Similarly, Dyke and Archettie argue that the feeling of community generated by performance in dance can “suddenly and viscerally connect individuals who would otherwise be unlikely to associate with one another in any manner, let alone in these ways” (17). They suggest that dance combines the body, social practices, and cultural imagination in a way that connects people, creates a sense of togetherness, and allows people to reflect on issues, which then helps shape society and reformulate national cultures (15-17). Barbour reaffirms this by stating that dance allows one to look at oneself, one’s relationship to the world, and to express national culture and individual identities in a new way (92-93). In this way, the great significance of embodied practices in shaping national culture becomes evident.

Most studies emphasize one of the afore “common methods” for creating national culture when analyzing the specific nation and its history. Other studies display ways that embodied performances work within a nation to create a sense of continuity and common feeling of culture. In my study, I display how globalization affects processes of shaping national culture in the twenty-first century. I emphasize the importance of considering kinaesthetic frameworks when exploring the ways that embodied practices construct national culture. I argue that it is necessary to study the actual bodily movements, alongside the commodification and athleticism of step dance as a result of globalization, to understand how national culture is shaped through physical practices. I analyze the revival of sean-nós dance to demonstrate the importance of studying movement, in relation to bodies, culture, and society, to fully understand how embodied practices help shape, reproduce, and reinvent national culture.

Methodology

For my case study, I intend to track the history of dance in Ireland and to identify key ways in which dance aids in the shaping of national culture through analyzing primary and secondary sources on dance in Ireland in conjunction with general Irish history. I will specifically be looking at the revival of sean-nós dance in the twenty-first century. By placing an analysis of sean-nós next to an analysis of Irish step dancing, which is the other main form of dance in Ireland, I will be able to recognize major differences that may have contributed to the revival of sean-nós.

Additionally, I draw on five interviews that I conducted with students studying Irish dance at the University of Limerick. I asked them questions in regards to their personal experiences with Irish dance, feelings that Irish dance evokes for them, and their understanding of its significance in Irish culture. I draw on material from the courses I took while studying at the University of Limerick in 2018, which include an Irish history course, a Gaelic-Irish language course that was split between learning the language and contextualizing the role of language within Irish society, a percussive dance class where I was able to learn some sean-nós dance, an introductory level course to Irish traditional music and dance, and an Irish step dance repertoire class where I learned step dancing.

My largest limitation for my research is in the type of my sources for my case study. I have found a few newspaper articles that mention the revival of sean-nós dance, and a couple of my interviews touch on sean-nós dance, as well. However, because this phenomenon is current, there is not yet very much published academic literature that discusses this revival in the

twenty-first century. Therefore, I also rely on my embodied experiences of sean-nós dance and Irish step dance to analyze this.

The Revival of Sean-nós Dance in Ireland

The past three centuries have been a time of constant change throughout Ireland, which can be seen through a parallel analysis of Irish society and Irish dance. Ireland was still very much under the control of the British in the 1700-1800s, a time when dancing masters were popular throughout Ireland. Dancing masters were male figures who travelled around to different, often rural, areas and were responsible for creating, teaching, and notating dances. They would often teach in a barn or a school and would reside with a family in whatever village they were currently visiting. First popular in Britain, the dancing master quickly spread to Ireland and influenced dance there, as stated by Sharon Phelan in *Dance in Ireland: Steps, Stages and Stories* (37). Frank Hall, in *Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty*, asserts that it is Irish dancing masters who taught Irish peasants a new way of bodily conduct that signified “a foreign control and domination of native society and culture” (23). It was common for dancing masters to discourage the use of the upper body, and they often gave students heavy stones to carry as they danced to keep their arms down. It is likely that this was done in order to absorb and reflect the culture of the British colonizer (Phelan 44-45). The role of the dancing master was crucial to the creation of group set dances, as well, as they were the ones responsible for finding ways to accommodate “less talented dancers” (Phelan 45).

The type of dance that dancing masters often taught was close to the ground, used one’s personal space, and was intimate. Catherine Foley, in *Perceptions of Irish Dance*, agrees, saying that one was said to be a good dancer if they could “dance within six square inches or on a dinner

plate” (41). If a dancing master invaded another dancing master’s territory, they held a “dance-off”, in which they would dance on upturned half-doors, tables, barrels, or even anvils to display the accuracy of their footwork (Phelan 129). Thus, as dancing masters were highly respected, this type of dancing is what became popular throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland. It must be noted, however, that each dancing master had his own distinct style of performing, and regional variations of dance occurred. The dance style that circulated Connemara, a region on the West coast of Ireland, was characterized by its low to the floor steps, improvisational qualities, and relaxed upper body. It was heavily embedded in Irish folk culture and often built a sense of community. People of all ages were invited to participate in the dance, particularly at *ceilis*, which were evening house gatherings that included traditional music, song, dance, and drinking and often continued until dawn (Phelan 88). This became known as sean-nós dance. However, Julie Henigan, in “Sean-nós in Donegal: In search of a definition”, asserts that it wasn’t until around the 1940s that the term ‘sean-nós’ was used, and that ‘sean-nós’ cannot be reduced to one definition. It simultaneously means the performance style, the performance context, the social function, and the repertoire; all of it contributes to what sean-nós is (97-105).

Nevertheless, when the Potato Famine hit Ireland in the mid-1840s, there was a drastic decline in Irish dance, as many people emigrated, died, or were simply focused on surviving beyond that trying time. Moreover, as claimed by Eoin O’Malley in *Contemporary States and Societies: Contemporary Ireland*, there was a decline in sean-nós dance, as the Church had increasing amounts of power over Irish dance and had disallowed the use of arms that was common with this form of dance (169). Sean-nós dance became associated with an “old way of

life”, which also contributed to its decline, as people were very forward-looking after the famine era. There were growing tensions between the Irish and the British, as the British laissez-faire attitude during the potato blight affected the Irish population and prolonged the famine. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Irish people had a strong desire for an Irish culture that was distinct from that of the British.

The result of this was the Gaelic Revival. Many political leaders of the time, including Douglas Hyde who co-founded the Gaelic League, argued for a need to revive and re-invent Irish culture in everyday life to counter the ongoing anglicization of the country. This was specifically done through increased emphasis on the Irish language, Irish literature, and Irish sports. Different organizations were established and figures emerged to accomplish this. William Butler Yeats led the literary revival, the Gaelic Athletic Association contributed to the rise in Gaelic football, hurling, and Irish handball, and the Gaelic League, established in 1893, focused on restoring the Irish language in everyday society (O’Malley 30). Music and dance quickly became a part of the cultural nationalist agenda, and the Gaelic League set about determining what dances were considered ‘Irish’ and what ones should be banned.

Several books published in the early 1900s included collections of ‘Irish dances’, marginalized other dance practices, and shaped perceptions of what Irish dance was supposed to be like, as informed by Catherine Foley in *Step Dancing in Ireland: Culture and History* (137). The first *feiseanna*², or Irish arts festival, was held in 1898. Sean-nós was eliminated from participation in the *feiseanna*, due to the “improvisation and composition of individual steps and styles” (Phelan 90). The aim of the Gaelic League was to formalize and standardize Irish dance,

² This is now referred to as a *feis*, or Irish dance competition.

and with the formation of the organization *An Coimisiún*³ after Irish independence in the 1920s, they were successful in that individuals had to take exams to become certified to teach step dance or adjudicate at *feiseanna*. “In its re-configuration and institutionalization of a particular dance aesthetic, *An Coimisiún* constructed and projected a unified image of Ireland through the medium of step dance,” which was, of course, then embodied by the dancers (147). On a large scale, the spontaneity and gaiety of dance gatherings were replaced by pre-determined dance repertoire. Solo step dancing began to emerge in more urban areas with the growth of Irish dance schools. Some rural dance masters, however, ignored the Gaelic League and *An Coimisiún*’s efforts and “retained their own unique repertoires and styles of movement” in small villages (Phelan 51-52). These small villages in rural areas, particularly in Western Ireland in areas such as Connemara, is where the Gaelic-Irish language remained heavily embedded in the culture. These areas, known as *Gaeltachts*, are where sean-nós continued to survive.

The Globalization of Irish Step Dance

Evolution in the Twentieth-Century

I suggest that the performance context of sean-nós dance, the contrasting evolutions of sean-nós dance and step dance, and the stark differences in kinaesthetic embodiment of those two dance forms are the main contributing factors that led to the revival of sean-nós dance in the twenty-first century. Sean-nós dance has been a growing practice of performative local culture, while step dance continues to experience the effects of globalization.

After independence in 1937, Ireland spent a few decades shaping its culture and identity. By the 1960s, Ireland’s population was on the rise, both from a small baby boom and from many

³ The Commission

Irish emigrants returning home after the economy stabilized post-World War II (O'Malley 10). Ireland became more outward-looking and began contributing to the global world; Irish music groups *The Cranberries* and *U2* became popular internationally in the 1960-1970s. Irish step dance had a similar trajectory. It continued to evolve, and the number of step dance competitions were growing. Irish step dancers came to resemble each other in solo competitive performances; the national perception of them came to be the image of a young, female dancer with curly hair, a fancy costume, and high frontal, athletic movements (Foley 36). The dance steps themselves also evolved significantly. From the mid-1900s onwards, there were developments in dance shoes, particularly the hard shoes, which allowed for new movements to be invented (Foley 178). Irish step dance started drawing on other dance forms, making the steps more complex. Taking from ballet, dancers began incorporating higher leaps, kicks, and more jumps into their performances, which was a stark contrast to the former tradition of using low levelled movements (Foley 39; Phelan 94). Stages became larger, which resulted in more travelling movements and more competent use of performance space, another divergence from the way that step dance used to be.

Celtic Tiger and Riverdance

By the 1990s, Ireland was experiencing a time of great economic prosperity. This economic boom, which was a result of increased consumption and inward investment, lasted for about 15 years and is commonly referred to as the Celtic Tiger. Ireland was becoming increasingly “secular, entrepreneurial, and economically competitive” (Foley 200), as unemployment fell from 18 percent to around 4 percent by the end of the 1990s (O'Malley 41). On April 30, 1994, in the midst of the Celtic Tiger, a seven-minute performance called

Riverdance took place at *The Eurovision Song Contest*, whose transnational television audience of three hundred million people thrust Irish step dance into the world of popular culture. As argued by Catherine Baker in “Wild Dance and Dying Wolves: Simulation, Essentialization, and National Identity at the Eurovision Song Contest”, *The Eurovision Song Contest*’s “implication in commercial practices creates pressures toward representing the nation through simplified well-known images” (173). This factor contributed to the popularity of the *Riverdance* performance, and a year later, this seven-minute performance had turned into a full-length production. This production put Irish dance on the global map, due to its combination of dance, music, lighting, costume, and technology on a “big stage”. Technological aspects of *Riverdance* - the microphones on dancers to amplify their sound and later the pre-recorded sounds of the steps - were crucial to the international legitimization of Irish step dance. The theatrical manner in which *Riverdance* was presented helped make it more accessible for popular audiences and “contributed to what is currently a global homogenization of the representation of Irish step dance” and Irish national culture, in general (Foley 40).

Commodification of Step Dance

Another result of the *Riverdance* phenomenon was that Irish dance schools doubled in size, and now, more than half of the registered teachers from around the world come from outside of Ireland (Foley 194). In fact, while I studied at the University of Limerick in the spring of 2018, I conducted a series of interviews with students studying Irish dance, all of whom were from various parts of Ireland, with the exception of student two, who is from the United States. Student two stated in her interview that her mom put her in an Irish step dance school so that she “could be just like *Riverdance*” (2018). Student four exclaimed that she would watch *Riverdance*

every Saturday morning and then practice her dancing afterwards so as to one day be like the dancers she watched. She stressed the influence that the *Riverdance*-era has had on Irish dancers and the overall growth of Irish step dance by saying, “I suppose everyone’s dream is *Riverdance*” (2018). While this claim might be a bit of a generalization, Angelika Masero states in *The Changes in Irish Dance Since Riverdance* that the growth in Irish step dance was so extreme that the 1999 All-Ireland dancing championship hosted between 2,000-3,000 competitors, expanding it to be a seven-day event, as opposed to the two-day event that it was in 1930 (14). People around the world bought into the success and popularity of *Riverdance* and wanted to participate, thus expanding and commodifying the industry of Irish step dance. Helen Brennan asserts in *The Story of Irish Dance* that because of the success of commercial stage shows like *Riverdance*, Irish step dance has become synonymous with glamour, and many people understand it as a “passport to world fame”, rather than as a performance of Irish national culture (156).

Adding to the commodification of Irish step dance are vendors and the costumes. At competitions and staged, commercial performances like *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*, vendors sell t-shirts, wigs, accessories, and other souvenirs. For performing step dance, a sturdy pair of hard shoes can cost upwards of £200, or around \$227. A state-of-the-art dress generally costs between £400 to £800, with the exception of the Doire Dress brand, where a plain dress already costs £800. On top of this, there are costs for accessories, which include embroidered tiaras, dress covers, aprons, magic wand curlers, caps to go over hair curlers, “poodle” socks, headbands, and wigs (Brennan 157). Although dancers aren’t judged exclusively on their looks, it certainly helps to look the part. Because they are competing on stage at the same time as other

dancers, wearing a dress that stands out may help draw a judge's attention to that dancer. Dancers are judged on their "lift" and their jumps, so the bouncier the wig, the higher they appear to jump. Most Irish dancers also tan their legs before they compete, so as to make them seem leaner and longer and to stand out on stage. During a conversation in my step dance repertoire class with several of the interviewees, I learned that deciding not to tan one's legs may make that dancer seem inexperienced and a judge may not watch them (2018). All of this is done in part to "meet the changing demands of Irish step dancers within the more affluent, modern and globalized Celtic Tiger Ireland" (Foley 185). However, it is the same commodification of Irish step dance that has served as a major catalyst for the emergence of marginal dance practices (Foley 34). Competitive step dance has become more for affluent social classes. Those who do not have the financial means to spend thousands of dollars are not as easily able to participate in this culture, adding to the appeal of alternative dance practices as a more accessible way of performing Irish national culture. In this way, space has been created for sean-nós dance to regain momentum in the twenty-first century.

Institutionalization of Sean-nós Dance

The revival of sean-nós dance is also due to the institutionalization of the dance form that began in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Beginning in the 1960s with the *Gaeltacht* Civil Rights Movement, where people protested insufficient representation in the annual *An tOireachtas*⁴, sean-nós song, dance, and music has been gaining more attention. In 1975, the *Oireachtas in Cois Fharraige* was held in Connemara, the home of most *Gaeltachts*, rather than Dublin, where it was normally held. Despite the event being changed to a more rural location,

⁴ A mixture of social events and arts competitions held annually in Dublin

the urban-middle class values of the *Oireachtas in Cois Fharraige* did not change. Thus, people in the *Gaeltacht* Civil Rights Movement decided to organize their own sean-nós dance competition. This initiative was successful enough that in 1977, *An tOireachtas* included another sean-nós dance competition (Brennan 140-141). The sean-nós dance competition scene has only been growing since the 1970s. However, they remain locally based and lack the bureaucratic features that the Irish Dancing Commission put in place for step dance competitions. For instance, Brennan reveals, “Competitors will often refuse to submit their names until the last minute, thus retaining the element of spontaneous performance inherent in the tradition (139-140). Brennan adds, “Following the announcement of the results of the competition, it is common for all the participants to get up to dance together, and they may be joined by any member of the audience who wishes to do so” (136). Wulff contributes that advertisements for sean-nós dance competitions are still written mostly in the Irish language, which helps sean-nós dance continue to be deeply embedded in local culture, resist the effects of globalization, and thus, be a more local performance of Irish national culture (21). This proves to be an effective method, as well. Liam Maolaodha, director of Oireachtas na Gaeilge⁵, mentions in an interview published by Pol O. Muiri in “Sean-nós dancing? It crashes through the language barrier at Ireland’s oldest arts festival, Oireachtas na Gaeilge” that the number of young dancers participating in sean-nós dance competitions and old-style arts festivals has been increasing since the beginning of the twenty first century. He claims that this demonstrates that “There are people in the Gaeltachts who are fighting ferociously to keep what they have alive. And there are people from outside the Gaeltachts who are doing their best to keep up with them” (12). The

⁵ Ireland’s oldest arts festival

groundedness of sean-nós dance competitions in local culture is one aspect of the performance context that is contributing to the current revival.

The legitimization and institutionalization of sean-nós dance has occurred in other ways, as well. Helena Wulff's *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and Mobility* discusses how sean-nós dance classes are now offered, whereas, after the dancing master era, people used to teach themselves by watching other dancers perform (127). In 2009, the winners of the All-Ireland Talent Show in 2009 were young sean-nós dancers from Connemara (Western People). Additionally, within the past two years, sean-nós dance has been introduced into the University of Limerick Irish dance program. As student one, who is now in her third year at the University of Limerick, mentioned in her interview, she is the first student on the "sean-nós track" for her degree in the dance program (2018). The University of Limerick began working to create a more structured and defined percussive dance degree during the 2017-2018 academic year. Although this continues to be refined, students can now study sean-nós dance in a university setting, this is tangible evidence of the sean-nós revival.

Differences between Sean-nós Dance and Step Dance

Since sean-nós dance is the main performance of national culture that has regained momentum in the post-*Riverdance* era, it is important to analyze its movements to more comprehensively understand its revival. In "Sean Nos Step Dancing - It's A Living Tradition," Kieran Jordan interviews a well-known dance prodigy from County Clare by the name of O'Dea who claims that the main appeal of sean-nós dance is that "it is 'natural'". During an interview he states, "You see Michael Flatley⁶ dance, and he loses 10 pounds at every performance. That's

⁶ Michael Flatley was the lead male performer of the original *Riverdance* full-length show. He also starred in other popular step dance stage productions, such as *Lord of the Dance*, *Feet of Flames*, and *Celtic Tiger Live*.

not a natural thing. Modern dancers are almost like athletes, and once you reach 40 or 45 years of age, you can't do it anymore. Dance is meant for all ages" (3). One of the core aspects of sean-nós is its ability to bring individuals of all ages together. Helena Wulff discusses in "Yo-Yo Fieldwork: Mobility and Time in a Multi-Local Study of Dance in Ireland", how at an informal sean-nós dance competition in a pub in the small village of Carraroe, the competitor's ages ranged from 10 years-old to 50 years-old, and it was the man in his 50s who ended up winning (128). Whereas, with competitive step dancing, once dancers turn 25 years old, they are no longer allowed to compete. My step dance professor at the University of Limerick even remarked during one class that competitive step dancers generally reach their peak in dancing around the age of 13, right before they go through puberty (Ryan, 2018). The dynamic of sean-nós dance is the complete opposite. I participated in a sean-nós dance workshop while I was studying in Limerick, and the man who taught it was easily in his late 70s. His age legitimized his skill; other students had immense respect for him and the steps he was teaching. Sean-nós dance is also more gender inclusive, whereas step dance continues to be a female dominated dance form. My step dance professor also made several comments throughout the semester that male dancers have to embody a hyper-masculinity if they want to be even remotely successful when competing against females in step dance (Ryan, 2018). Thus, sean-nós dance is more attractive and inviting for a wider range of ages and genders. There are more possibilities with sean-nós dance than with step dance for gender expression and age variances. It allows for a sense of togetherness across differences, which is another contributing factor to its revival in the twenty-first century.

Barbara O'Connor, in *The Irish Dancing: Cultural Politics and Identities, 1900-2000*, supports this by arguing that community is cultivated through the social context and kinaesthetics of sean-nós dance (84). For some, the motive to dance sean-nós is for the craic⁷, which student one agreed with during her interview (2018). Both student one and student three emphasized the fact that sean-nós dance is more about enjoyment, while step dance has become much more extreme and tends to only focus on technique and a certain bodily standard (2018). Not only that, but the informal environments in which sean-nós dance takes place serve as great social levellers (O'Connor 85-86). Social class, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, and all other differences that individuals are typically defined by are disregarded, and it becomes solely about the dance and the music. Brennan includes a comment made to her by a man who exclaimed that "Sean-nós dancing will get people here on a kind of 'communal high'" (142). Henigan contributes that sean-nós "can serve at once as a form of entertainment, as an emotional release, and as a means of communication, expressing life as it enriches it, creating connections with the community and with the world at large" (97-105). Although she is speaking specifically to the function of sean-nós singing, it is entirely applicable to sean-nós dance, as well. Sean-nós dance creates community within Ireland, and as Henigan suggests, can possibly create this sense of togetherness in any lived community in the world, so long as the performance context and individuals are present.

Embodied Differences

While studying in Ireland, I experienced drastic differences between sean-nós dance and hardshoe competitive step dance through personal embodiment of the dance forms, as well. Step

⁷ Irish vernacular for 'fun'

dance involves holding the body very upright in uncomfortable ways. My step dance professor at the University of Limerick would constantly correct me for not holding my shoulder blades close enough together while dancing, for not keeping my knees and feet turned out past what is comfortable, and for bending my knees when landing a jump. One of the first days of my step dance class, he said to me that if it didn't hurt, then I would know that I wasn't doing it correctly (Ryan, 2018). However, this unnatural bodily standard that step dance requires can be quite dangerous and make dancers more prone to injury. In fact, there were a couple girls in my class that were constantly trying to recover from injuries that they incurred while step dancing many years ago. The footwork is quite intricate in hardshoe competitive step dancing. The jumps should be high, the legs high and long. Student five stated in her interview with me that when she competes in hardshoe step dance, she focuses on being strong and powerful, more than anything else. Step dancing is hard work; it involves pushing the physical boundaries of the body, trying to invent new tricks and outdo other dancers (2018). Feet can always be turned out more, kicks can be higher, shoulders pulled back more. Foley confirms my observations, saying that all Irish step dance aims for erect posture (37). Step dance continues to be for those who are very physically-abled.

Conversely, in my sean-nós dance class, I felt so much relief from letting my upper body relax and my knees bend, from allowing myself to breathe and letting my body respond naturally to what my feet were doing. I found this dance style much easier to embody. In sean-nós dance, the feet remain close to the ground; there are no elaborate or physically demanding jumps. Wulff supports this by mentioning that "low and fierce" is how good sean-nós dance should be (19). While dancing sean-nós, I did not feel pressure to conform to a certain body standard, either. I

felt accepted the way I was, without having to alter my appearance or physicality. Movement in sean-nós dance is also more improvisational, which is one of the defining characteristics of the dance form. Student one maintained that every sean-nós dancer gradually finds their own style, which contributes to a feeling of individuality (2018). Not only is this dance form deeply rooted in Irish culture and history, but it simultaneously promotes individual expression within a community context, which is an increasingly important value in the present time. People in today's world are becoming more concerned with individual identity and having space to explore that identity. Sean-nós dance allows for that, but in a supportive and inclusive setting, which adds significantly to its increasing ability to serve as a performance of national culture.

Music differences

Additionally, the majority of the students that I interviewed commented on the connection of dance to traditional music. Traditional Irish music continues to play a significant role in Irish culture, arguably even more so than Irish dance and is thus an important factor to consider when contrasting step dance with sean-nós dance. The music in sean-nós is intrinsically linked to the dancing; the dancer and musicians interact with each other, play off of one another, and compose together as the performance unfolds. While sean-nós dance is almost exclusively performed to live music, competitive step dancing uses recorded music. Student two found this to be a limiting and unattractive factor of competition culture and that using recorded music, along with the evolution of the steps, was sacrificing too much of the integrity of the dance.

As footwork in step dancing has evolved and become more intricate and complex, the music has resultantly had to become slower to accommodate the dancers. The dance prodigy O'Dea contributes that competitive step dancers don't know the history behind the music or their

steps anymore since it has evolved so much in the growing era of globalization. He maintains that “[The dancing] is not tied in anymore with the music, poetry, and song” (Jordan 2).

Musicians often say that the music for competitive step dances “is non-creative and restricted to a small set of tunes which are [in turn] restricted to the bare essentials”, that there is no spontaneity or opportunity for a musician to develop (Brennan 153). Every student, with the exception of student four who did not have much experience dancing to live music, mentioned that dancing to live music adds a sense of liveliness and appeal to any form of Irish dance, but especially sean-nós dance. When it comes to sean-nós dance, Wulff goes as far to say that the music helps *do* the dancing. She quotes Paraic Hopkins, a previous winner of the Cararroe Sean-nós Competition, “When you see somebody who enjoys [sean-nós], he gets carried away! He’s like floating in the air and it is the music that is holding him up!” (Wulff 20).

The qualities that are inherent to sean-nós dance - its emphasis on individual expression, a sense of inclusivity and community, and the connection to music - all contribute to the revival of sean-nós dance in the twenty first century. Brennan articulates that some individuals are concerned about the future of sean-nós dance, in that they worry that with the growing sean-nós dance competition scene, dancers will begin altering their movements to match the perceived preferences of the adjudicator (147). However, many locals maintain that this tradition is so deeply embedded in Irish culture that it is strong enough to successfully adapt new dance ideas (Brennan 149). Whether either of those things happen will be a test of time.

From this analysis, it appears that an invented tradition, such as Irish step dance, can be affected by globalization to the extent that it becomes detached from the intention behind its creation, which Hobsbawm identifies as seeking to create certain national values and to imply

continuity with the past (1). Other common methods used by nations to create national culture, such as everyday activities and behaviors and the desire for the 'authentic' through the rural, continue to be used in contemporary times, as well. Globalization makes national culture more dynamic and shifting, which then creates space for marginalized performances of national culture, that have remained embedded in the culture and history of a nation, to emerge. The revival of those performances of national culture are predicated on the continued globalization of the more popularized performances of national culture. Previously marginalized, embodied performances of national culture, like sean-nós dance, can create a sense of collective national culture, as they are practices that combine the body, social values and behaviors, and cultural imagination. The movements in sean-nós dance exemplify how the physical movements of performed national culture can significantly contribute to its ability to serve as such. Sean-nós dance also displays how this type of performed national culture is more apt to withstand the effects of globalization, as it has remained within the nation. This analysis demonstrates the need to study both conceptual and kinaesthetic frameworks to better understand the shaping of national culture through physical practices.

Conclusion

I conclude from my research that the revival of sean-nós dance is predicated on the globalization of step dance and is due to the inherent kinaesthetic qualities of sean-nós dance. Globalization has affected step dance greatly, as seen with the international success of step dance stage shows like *Riverdance*, which initially put Irish dance on the global map during the Celtic Tiger in the mid-1990s. Nowadays, Irish step dance is a global commodity. Similarly, step dance competitions have become more concerned with athleticism, creating new tricks, and decorative

costumes, and they focus less on performing Irish national culture, which was the original purpose behind its invention during the Gaelic Revival. Thus, globalization creates a window for previously marginalized practices of national culture to regain popularity, especially as national culture is more dynamic in the twenty first century. Additionally, I demonstrated the inherent qualities of the sean-nós dance style, such as how it cultivates an inclusive environment, supporting O'Connor's claim that sean-nós dance serves as a social leveller across differences (85-86). These two major factors - the globalization of step dance and the movements and performance context of sean-nós dance - as supported by literature on Irish dance, make explicit the factors behind the revival of sean-nós dance in twenty first century Ireland.

Existing scholarship on national culture discusses common ways that nations shape their national culture, those being invented traditions, everyday behaviors, and romanticizing the rural. Rural places have many factors, like landscape, food, music, and dance, that are used to create a sense of 'authenticity' within a nation. Everyday behaviors are also a heavily relied upon way to create a distinct national culture. Invented traditions, as argued by Hobsbawm, shape national culture through implying continuity with the past (1). There is literature that addresses the impact of globalization on these commonly used methods for shaping national culture, along with literature that discusses the relationship between bodies and society as a way of creating and expressing culture. However, most scholarship fails to consider the influential and valid role of movements and embodied culture, such as dance, in the discussion of globalization and national culture reconfiguration. My study of sean-nós dance in Ireland addresses the impact of globalization on an invented tradition and how space is then created for the resurgence of a

historically marginalized performance of national culture through its attractive kinaesthetic and structural qualities.

Given more time and resources, I would travel back to Ireland to study this further. When I was there, I planned on researching a slightly different topic, and resultantly, did not pay as close attention to sean-nós dance. I would travel to Gaeltachts to specifically study sean-nós dance and to better embody that dance form. I only visited Gaeltachts for leisure during my time in Ireland. In the interviews that I conducted, I focused more attention on the values embodied by step dance as an invented tradition and the significance that individuals thought step dance had in Ireland. Thus, more research needs to be conducted on the structural qualities and aspects of sean-nós dance.

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