

Transatlantic Dialogues: Sectarian Violence and Popular Performance in Nineteenth Century Belfast

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Motivation

- To examine how the transatlantic circulation of performance intersected with and intervened in the intensifying sectarian violence in nineteenth-century Belfast
- To explore how theatre, as one of the city's only public secular spaces, operated within the increasingly segregated city

Project Description

- This project examines how transatlantic circulations of performance negotiated the city's intensifying sectarian conflict through its imagining of Ireland's history and future. Occurring in one of the only public secular spaces in the city, these performances intervened in and created a potentially safe space for debates about Belfast's present and future, as a city, part of Ireland, and a commercial jewel in the British Empire. As industry boomed and migrants within and outside of Ireland helped make the city temporarily Ireland's largest, popular performance provided an opportunity to imagine competing notions of Irishness. These performances reveal nuanced patterns of exchange and influence and demonstrate how the discourses surrounding emerging sectarian violence were embodied.

Context

- Much of Irish theatre history is dominated by ideas of modernity that situate W.B. Yeats and the Irish Literary Theatre as the 'beginning' of Irish theatre. These narratives often exclude theatre in the north and non-text based performances that did not serve middle class audiences. Irish theatre historians have challenged these narratives, but common characterizations of nineteenth-century Belfast performance still represent it as collapsed or virtually absent. This project builds on the work of scholars, such as Mark Phelan, to consider how these ignored, usually non-literary performance spaces rewrite Irish performance historiography and suggest a crucial cultural role for performance in navigating political, economic, and social conflict.

Transatlantic Dialogues examines how **transatlantic circulations of performance** negotiated nineteenth-century Belfast's intensifying **sectarian conflict**.

Project Deliverables

- During the 2020-1 academic year, I will work on completing the archival research for the project in Belfast and London
- This research will contribute to the writing of a scholarly monograph over the next several years.

Potential Impact

- Speaking to theatre, performance, religious, and Irish studies, this research suggests a rethinking of patterns of cultural exchange through transatlantic cultural circulation and offers a model of theatre's flexibility and response to crises.
- Placing these secular theatrical performances spaces into dialogue with broader political and religious factors illustrates how these spaces of engagement, exchange, and embodiment operated as vital local and transatlantic nodes in negotiating emerging sectarian tensions and violence.
- Building on recent Irish theatre scholarship, this project considers how placing non-literary and northern Irish performances back into the scholarly conversation rewrites prominent narratives in Irish theatre historiography.

