

Parading Multicultural Ireland: Identity Politics and National Agenda's in the 2007 St. Patrick's Festival

The Dublin St. Patrick's Day Parade offers up images of green clad participants giving a performance of imagined Irishness. In 2007, however, along with the usual Irish school children, tidy town pageants and Irish American marching bands that have dominated the parade since its inception in 1995, 650,000 spectators came out to see Brazilian samba bands, African drummers, and a host of Irish and immigrant community groups. The cultural diversity amongst participants was evidence of the festival organizers' aim to increase the presence of the "New Ireland" in its pageant. The reasoning behind Dublin City Council's emphasis on participation by multicultural communities in the parade was to help alleviate racial tensions within the nation and to foster understanding amongst cultures in the city's changing social landscape.

**Dublin City Council's City Fusion, the largest pageant in the parade, presented "Citychange" as a new legend of Dublin which "speaks of the challenges faced and contributions made by the new citizens from all corners of the globe to the city"¹ City Fusion combines professional artist and performance designers, directors and facilitators with amateur immigrant community groups and asylum seeker organizations from Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia to design, construct, and perform their pageant. This essay examines the transformation of cultural identity found within traditional Irish culture and those of Irish immigrant community groups within the 2007 St. Patrick's Festival. By including contributions from multicultural Ireland in a parade noted for its celebration of Irish identity and Irish culture, City Fusion and the St. Patrick's Festival

¹ "St. Patrick's Festival and Dublin City Council launch City Fusion," *St. Patrick's Festival Press Release*, (Dublin: March 2007).

attempt to publicly investigate understandings of Irishness for the New Ireland. However, though the City Fusion pageant was granted the 2007 Chairman's Award for their interpretation of a modern, multicultural Ireland, the combination of professional artists and community groups remained fraught with tension over how *Citychange* represented the multiple cultures within it. While the Dublin City Council and City Fusion concentrated on the merging of cultures reflecting the “new Irish identity” of Dublin in the 2000s, many of the communities themselves were more concerned with presenting their own distinct national heritage and culture. By documenting the creative process behind the City Fusion pageant, the tensions arising from the political agenda of the Dublin City Council and the aims of the immigrant groups themselves, the following seeks to consider the politics behind City Fusion’s parading of an evolving Ireland.

St. Patrick’s Day: A Festival of “Malleability”

St. Patrick’s Day has been popular across continents as a celebration of Irish identity (real or imagined), however, the large scale parades and the “party-like atmosphere” synonymous with the holiday began abroad, only to be brought to Ireland in the mid-1990s. Parades in honour of St. Patrick’s Day began not in Ireland, but in North America in the late 18th Century as a public platform for both the establishment of, and resistance to, civic allegiances for Irish American community groups.² In Ireland, the national holiday was traditionally celebrated through small scale events, while the parades that occurred until the St. Patrick’s Day Festival began in 1995 were made up primarily of school groups and marching bands. Despite complaints that the Irish parades were not

² Jane Gladden Kelton,, “The New York St. Patrick’s Day Parade: Invention of Contention and Consensus,” *The Drama Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3, Processional Performance. (Autumn, 1985), pp. 93-105.

engaging to the local public, Frank Magee of the Dublin Tourism organization, defended the event in 1993 by proclaiming that though the Dublin St. Patrick's Day parade lacked any central theme or structure, "Our function is to promote Dublin as a tourist destination, not necessarily to entertain the people of Dublin."³ In November of 1995, however, the Irish government decided to change the country's traditional celebrations of St. Patrick's Day as a part of their new initiative to revitalize the Irish tourist industry and create a more dynamic celebration for the local community. Orchestrated by its new Artistic Director, Rupert Murray, the St. Patrick's Day Festival was established as a four day event in celebration of Irish culture and identity culminating in a large scale parade through the Dublin city centre. The Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism argued that the event was "designed to evoke celebration and pride among our people and extend a genuine Irish welcome to our visitors."⁴ The Festival had not only an Artistic Director to provide an overall vision for the performance theme, storyline and aesthetic of the Parade, but a Designer was also hired to create an artistic vision for the parade pageants and other performance events involved in the festival itself.

Adaptation becomes Tradition

At the beginning of its inception in Dublin, the domestic response to the parade was mixed. Many criticized the event as an "Americanization" of Ireland's national day, while others found it catering to tourist audiences (especially those from North America) and therefore lacking a local community presence. The public scepticism towards the

³ Frank Magee, Dublin Tourism, 1993. Quoted in "Don't Hail, St. Patrick, on our Glorious £500,000 Parade," *Irish Times*, 15 March 1996.

⁴ "Speech by John O'Donoghue, T.D., Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, at the launch of the St. Patrick's Festival 2007 in Royal Hibernian Academy, Ely Place, Dublin 2 on Wednesday 14th February at 6.00pm.," Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism Press Release, 14 February, 2007, website: <<http://www.arts-sport-tourism.gov.ie/publications/release.asp?ID=1873> >

event also became caught up in contemporary Irish debates over the increasing consumer culture of Celtic Tiger Ireland as well as the manufacturing of Irish national identity for a foreign market. Nevertheless, despite the supposed “Americanization” of St. Patrick’s Day through the event, the re-appropriation of the St. Patrick’s Festival in Dublin has included alterations to the style of the parade itself. Ever a site of transformation and hybridity, the parade in Dublin has become more adaptive and performative than its American counterpart. **The solemnity and military style of the parading Irish American members of the police force, marching bands and well known figures of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in New York City, has been re-created to reflect the changes to Ireland itself. A mixture of carnival, pageants, and parade events from other traditions (like those in the Caribbean, Brazil, Africa and other American events like the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade) have added new life to the school children, music bands and marching figures found in its New York City counterpart.

**Subverting any solemnity found in the parade, the 2007 City Fusion pageant included a large scale dance choreographed by Nigerian born entertainer, Dr. Rhumba, to be danced by the entire 250 participants at strategic points throughout the parade. Many of the events in the St. Patrick’s Day Festival mimic other Irish street theatre festivals such as *Macnas’ Galway Arts Festival parade began by Arts and Drama students from NUI Galway in 1986. Like the outdoor spectacles of the Galway Arts Festival, the expanding St. Patrick’s Festival incorporates street performance, clowning, puppeteering and carnivalesque celebrations with live drummers and other performances of cultural hybridity. In this way, though influenced by North American culture, the Dublin St.

Patrick's Day parade has been subsumed by the changes to Ireland itself and become, yet again, a hybrid exchange of cultures which are affecting the modern Irish landscape.

*Dublin's expanding St. Patrick's Festival has grown to include other events like the **Opening Night Spectacle* in the Dublin City Centre which included parade excerpts, music and dance events, the **March An Lá Gaelach* which was created to promote the Irish language through workshops and events in Irish, the **Céilí Mór* which was an event of Irish dancing, **40 Songs of Green* by the Barabbas theatre company which was a "musical celebration of "Irish-ness" played by 200 singers and five Barabbas actors/clowns,"⁵ and a street theatre **Big Day Out* event to end the festival with mime, face painting, clowning, juggling and other performances from local and international artists.

Immigration and the New Ireland

Parades have been used by immigrant communities for generations to symbolically fuse new cultures to that of the status quo as well as to subvert the hegemonic culture through highly visible performances of difference. Joanne Schneider argues that "parade commentators stress unity and community self-identification,"⁶ while collective civic performances continue to provide public platforms to display and celebrate collective identity for a society. Christy Fox argues that parades use entertaining and often abstract methods to explore topical societal issues. For Fox, Ireland has an established tradition of using parades as sites for the community to negotiate issues of identity politics and

⁵ "St. Patrick's Day Dublin, Ireland's National St. Patrick's Day Celebrations MARCH 15th - 19th 2007: Dublin, Ireland - The only place to be in March 2007," *St. Patrick's Festival Press Release*, (St. Patrick's Festival, Dublin: 2007). website: http://www.stpatricksdays.ie/cms/mediaroom_release01.html

⁶ Schneider, Joanne, "Defining Boundaries, Creating Contacts: Puerto Rico and Polish Presentations of Group Identity Through Ethnic Parades." *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 18:1 (Spring, 1990), 33-57: 36.

societal change. **“Grounded in local, topical themes, the parades can provide the audience with alternative means to interact with current societal problems.”⁷ The recent shifts in power structures of the Irish landscape have greatly influenced the Irish community’s reflections upon the nation and collective identity turning cultural presentations of Irishness into contested sites for the nation. The first Dublin St. Patrick’s Day Festival in March, 1996 amongst other collective performances of the community, provided a public platform for communal anxiety over the rapid changes to the Irish cultural landscape. Thus the Dublin St. Patrick’s Festival exhibits not only performances of Irishness, but also becomes a locus operandi for manifestations of a society undergoing rapid social change.

City Fusion

The 2007 “St. Patrick’s Festival” have shifted their response to the parading of Irishness, to include issues of immigration in Ireland. For Norma Leen, the St. Patrick’s Festival producer, it became important to present groups in the parade who demonstrate the changes to Dublin’s community in recent years.⁸ In March 2007, St. Patrick’s Festival defends this claim in a press release:

*This new intercultural community project brings community groups from different cultural and regional backgrounds together to create a pageant for the St. Patrick’s Festival Parade that celebrates the multi-cultural nature of the city today and celebrates the new communities and contribution they make to the city.⁹

⁷ Fox, Christy “Creating Community: Macnas’ Galway Arts Festival Parade, 2000.” *New Hibernian Review*, 7:2 (Summer, 2003), 19-37: 20.

⁸ Norma Leen to author, January 2007.

⁹ “St. Patrick’s Festival and Dublin City Council Launch City Fusion,” *St. Patrick’s Festival Press Release*, March 2007.

The inclusion of immigrant community groups into the St. Patrick's Festival reflects the radical transformation to the cultural topography of the country's population in recent years. **According to the 2006 Census, over 420,000 non-Irish nationals are estimated living in Ireland as of 2006, this presents an increase of almost double from 224,000 non-Irish nationals found in the 2002 Census.¹⁰ The new immigrants have caused multiple shifts in the way the Irish perceive their own identity and the nation itself.

City Fusion explored these issues of identity and multiculturalism through thematic structures of the pageant itself as well as with community-led workshops. The impetus behind the project was to explore the impact immigration has upon the Irish community and examine how diverse cultures can co-exist in the New Ireland. **In the *City Fusion* Documentary, Laura Garbataviciute Down, a member of the Lithuanian Association, narrates the aims of the project:

Ireland is a country, someone said, small enough to see its own borders ... When those borders opened up, and the faces, customs and languages of the small island multiplied rapidly, some wondered if this country was perhaps too small to meet the needs of so many.¹¹

St. Patrick's Festival created a participatory pageant involving sixteen immigrant and Irish community groups to design a story of the "New Dublin" through an examination of "How ... a country of this size absorb so many influences yet maintain its own

¹⁰According to the 2006 Census, the population had increased by 8.1% since the last census in 2002, the highest population increase on record. The fastest growing category were EU nationals, apart from Irish or UK nationals, along with Africans and Asians. Polish nationals numbered 63,300 while the number of Lithuanian nationals was 24,600. In overall terms, non Irish made up 10 per cent of the usual resident population that indicated a nationality in 2006. [Central Statistics Office, "Census 2006: Central Demographic Results," (Dublin: Government of Ireland, 2007), 25.]

¹¹ Laura Garbataviciute Down, narrator, *Future Legend: The Story of City Fusion An Intercultural Initiative for St. Patrick's Festival 2007*, directed by Raven, produced by St. Patrick's Festival in partnership with Dublin City Council: (Ireland: 2007).

identity?”¹² By combining different community groups into a single pageant, the Festival aims to celebrate difference but also create unity within the St. Patrick’s Day parade.

The theme of City Fusions Pageant, which was designed to complement the overall theme of *Legendary* created by the St. Patrick’s Day Parade itself, was *City Change*. The pageant narrates the legend of a new city: At its opening, *City Fusion* tells the story of immigrants entering a new city for the first time; they have to get through the dragons of bureaucracy to do so (red tape, visas, immigration, etc...), and then they find themselves caught in the rhythm of a city they don’t understand. As the strangers navigate through the pulse of the people, they find themselves face to face with the powerful towers of the city itself. Slowly, the immigrant begins to understand the city’s rhythm and adapt to life in the new city. The pageant ends with the successful introduction of the stranger into society and this is celebrated with a dance led by the Carnival Queen and the Chameleon, representing a constantly evolving city. This story manifests through a series of sections created by the community groups involved in the parade. The pageant begins with the Igbo Association’s Masquerade and drummers, and ending with the Sporasi Asylum Seekers organization as chameleons, carnival queens and dancers celebrating to the music of a French Brazilian samba band flown in for the occasion.

As the first year of the project, *City Fusion* found working with adult community groups provided different challenges than those found previously using school children. The mixture of professional and amateur participants raises many ethical questions over issues of representation and authenticity in the project. Though the community groups themselves perform in the parade, their input and cultural contributions are interpreted

¹² Ibid.

and adapted by the professional designers working on the project. Despite the encouragement of group participation in the designing process by the organizers, in reality, designing the large scale, high profile parade event fell to the project designer, Vanessa Daws, and Artistic Director, Kareen Pennyfather along with their team of facilitators. This formula worked well with school children, who were used to following the advice of their leaders, but the complex issues of identity politics and community allegiance found with the immigrant groups raised many concerns previously unknown by the Festival staff. Except for the arts-led group Arts Polonia, and the Igbo Association's masquerade, the participants involved were primarily new to artistic design and performance. Due to the nature of working with unskilled amateur community groups, despite their contribution in weekly facilitated workshops, most of the costumes, the more complicated puppets, hats and backpacks are completed by professional artists and volunteers.

Working as a performance facilitator for City Fusion in 2007, several concerns arose over the conflicting agendas between the professional artists (including myself) and the some of the immigrant community groups participating. The Dublin City Council refused to allow logos of any kind in the parade itself, including banners, signs, national colours or obvious signifiers from the various cultures involved. The concept behind the City Fusion project was a multicultural, multivocal "new city", highlighting the mixture of cultures involved, but not allowing for any distinction between the cultures themselves. For many of the community groups involved, some of which had strong individual identities, their aim in participating in the parade was to highlight the

uniqueness of their community, not to blend in with other community groups into an amalgamated whole.

Despite the focus on a fusion of cultures by the Festival organizers, some of the community groups subverted the attempts of the festival towards amalgamating the groups' identities in their participation in the parade. **The Polish group of artists involved in the pageant, Arts Polonia, who were in the section to represent new globalized "fusion" cities, with the women wearing elaborate hats made of famous buildings from different cities such as the Eiffel Tower, the Empire States Building and other signature buildings from different countries, insisted that the costumes be in Polish colours, while the men appear as traditional horse riding knights, known as the Lajkonik, a powerful image in Krakow mythology. These symbols were designed to signify to the Polish St. Patrick's parade audience of the group's nationality, thus giving different codified meanings to the group's own target audience: subtly presenting a national identity in the parade for their own national community.

**The Lithuanian Association were also determined to publicly display their identity through subtle subversions throughout the construction and performance process. Allocated to the "city section" of the parade, the group performed the rhythm of urban life by portraying workers who made up a city's inhabitants. Inspired by a choral section of the musical *Oliver*, the Artistic Director, Kareen Pennyfather, wished to create a choreographed celebration of diversity in the urban landscape through the performance. At first, the Lithuanian Association was going to be paired up with another group from

the Warrenmount School in Dublin.¹³ However, the Association were adamant that they remain separate in order to maintain a strong sense of collective identity in the pageant. They also did not want any of the characters they portrayed to include blue collar workers such as maids, construction workers or waiters as they were afraid of being stereotyped as unskilled labourers because of their Lithuanian origin. Eventually it was decided to include characters from the group's own professions such as a chemist, two office workers as well as neutral professions including bakers, post office workers, PR Ladies and mothers with babies. They wanted to include a national food for the bakers to carry, as well as wear scarves or Lithuanian signs advertising their own culture and association to the audience members. Extreme consternation occurred when the sevelini –which had been painstakingly painted the *right* shade of grey by the group—were repainted a bright yellow by the City Fusion Designer who felt that the buns did not look “carnival” enough to appear in the parade. The anger by the group over this seemingly minor issue illustrates the importance for many of the immigrant community groups that they're attendance in the parade remain visible to the audience. In addition, despite being told they were not allowed to wear Lithuanian flags, colours or scarves in the parade, some of the participants rebelled against this dictum by wrapping Lithuanian scarves around their necks, allowing them to subtly peak out of their elaborate costumes of City workers. This subtle rebellion against the St. Patrick's Festival rules emphasizes for the Lithuanian Association their loyalty to the Lithuanian parade audience members through signifying signs of origin, remaining largely un-noticed by the non-Lithuanian viewers.

¹³ The school group, which eventually came down to only three participants, performed immediately in front of the Lithuanian Association, and though also a part of the city section, were kept separate from the Lithuanian group as their request.

Nevertheless, despite these conflicting aims existing within various groups in the pageant, many of the groups involved did not feel concerned over issues of representation. The smaller groups involved in the pageant, such as the Indonesian Association (made up of five participants) or the Nigerian Association (existing of a total of two participants), though having attendance problems due to work schedules, found themselves able to enjoy all aspects of the design, construction and performance process without witnessing any tensions over representation in the parade. Furthermore, these smaller groups also were able to interact and work together, providing a rare moment of cross-cultural collaboration in the pageant. For the large asylum seekers organization, Sporasi, the project was also successful at bringing together people from different communities and helping them find ways to meet members of the larger Dublin community. Sporasi Participant Eloho Egwuterai describes the difficulties inherent in the asylum seeker's experience and how important projects like the St. Patrick's Festival remain to her and others like her:

**As a new person in the country, you can't work, you can't do anything, you just get yourself involved with things like this because at the end of the day you get papers or your permit to stay and work and you'll be like a fish out of water. I had my fears about integrating with white people because you share different cultures, you feel you're so different, but ... [you do] projects with them like this, you realize you share a lot of things in common, you might even turn out to be best of friends. It's a recommendation I would give to anyone.¹⁴

¹⁴ Eloho Egwuterai, quoted in: Raven, "Future Legend: The Story of City Fusion an Intercultural Initiative for St. Patrick's Festival 2007," (Ireland: 2007).

The project was aimed to help foster exchanges between cultures, and many of the participants found that they were able to not only participate in the St. Patrick's Festival, but also find other arts organizations and community led projects to get involved in after the festival ended. Of the 16 organizations involved in the 2007 parade, many of the groups participated in the 2008 St. Patrick's Festival as well, making the *City Fusion* community project a long term event to continue to forge connections between the different community groups in the years to come.

**While the St. Patrick's Festival organizers desired to create a pageant celebrating the fusion of cultures in a ubiquitous multicultural whole, many of the groups themselves desired to strengthen ties to their own community as well as provide the opportunity to publicly display their individual cultural heritage as separate from the other participants. The importance of cultural signifiers in the parade, no matter how subtle, as indicators of their unique cultural heritage were consistently sought after by the Polish, Lithuanian, Igbo Association and others, to celebrate not a *fusion* of cultures, but their own individual contribution to the festival. Though the Dublin City Council denied the possibility of individual banners stating which community groups were involved in each section of the pageant, they negotiated the creation of a banner at the beginning of the *Fusion* pageant stating the participating organizations. For the Lithuanians and the St. Patrick's Festival staff, the rushed repainting of the sevelini to their appropriate colour was an illustration of the constant negotiation between the artistic team and the community groups throughout the festival process.

"St. Patrick's Festival and Dublin City Council Launch City Fusion." *St. Patrick's Festival Press Release*, March 2007.

Office, Central Statistics. "Census 2006: Central Demographic Results." Dublin: Government of Ireland, 2007.

Raven. "Future Legend: The Story of City Fusion an Intercultural Initiative for St. Patrick's Festival 2007." 15 mins. Ireland, 2007.