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Exiled Across the Mersey

Performing Religio-Cultural Identity at the Borders with the Liverpool Welsh

Abstract

This paper juxtaposes the hybridised, religio-cultural distinctiveness of traditional articulations of Liverpool Welsh identity with discoveries made during the creation of the semi-autobiographical performance *Cartref/At Home* and the exhibition *Cegin y Capel/The Chapel Kitchen*. The Liverpool Welsh are a community of Welsh "ex-pats" living in Liverpool, though historically the relationship between the Northern Welsh and Liverpool has been ambivalent. In common with many "colonised" peoples, Welsh people have "never simply and completely opposed" English society (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 1998, 12-13), nor have they ever completely rejected the influence of Liverpool on their culture and industry, even after the flooding of Capel Celyn (1965) became such a resounding symbol of their colonised status. Today, the community is largely invisible to other Liverpudlians. Self-described exiles, the Liverpool Welsh view themselves as a Welsh language community located in England. Key aspects of the community's identity are chronicled by its male leadership, expressed through the prism of Welsh Nonconformism. This paper re-examines the significance of more traditional articulations of the Liverpool Welsh community's distinctiveness, calling for a more inclusive, multi-vocal approach to chronicling its histories, one that better represents the range of experiences contained within the community in the twenty-first century.

Performance, Religion and Spirituality vol. 3 no 1, pp. 5-23
http://prs-journal.org ISSN: 2637-4366

Self-described as “a community of exiles living on Merseyside” (Rees n.d.) the Cymry Lerpwl (Liverpool Welsh) are an ex-pat community of Welsh speakers based in the city of Liverpool in the north west of England. Many Welsh have been drawn to Liverpool for work and education, settling in key areas around the city like the Welsh streets in Liverpool 8, in Anfield and in “Little Wales,” an area just outside the city centre (Museum of Liverpool n.d.). Historically, they were tremendously influential. Their impact on the local dialect is as profound as that of the Irish (Collinson 2015) and they were well-regarded for their skills in construction, with much of the architectural landscape of the city of Liverpool built by Welsh hands (Gower 2020; Rees 2001; 2008; 2014). In the nineteenth century, their affection for Liverpool was apparent in their informal designation of the city as the “capital of north Wales” announced in a public meeting attended by newly elected Liberal MP and future Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, in 1890. It is an aphorism still heard today (Shipton 2008).The prevalence of the Welsh language across North Wales, coupled with Liverpool’s status within the British Empire, meant that in the nineteenth century there would be little discernible difference between a new arrival from Wales and one from any other part of the realm. As Eric Richards points out in his book *Britannia’s Children: Emigration from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland since 1600*, to many Welsh migrants, the mix of populations in the port would be just as foreign as travelling to Wales’s colony, y Wladfa, in Patagonia (2004, 302). Consequently, like their countryfolk in Trelew or Gaiman, they “developed a tendency to accentuate their Welshness” (2004, 302), and so, though many Welsh immigrants may have been able to speak some English, the Cymry Lerpwl community principally evolved as a Welsh language enclave.

Traditionally Liverpool’s high status with the population of north Wales is grounded first and foremost in the convenience of its location. The distance between Caernarfon and Liverpool is around 75 miles, whereas the distance between Caernarfon and Cardiff (Wales’s actual capital city), is nearer 150 miles. An additional factor is Wales’s unique geography whereby routes heading east, out of the country and into England, have tended to be more accessible than internal routes running north to south. Today, those seeking to travel from north Wales by train to their capital city, Cardiff, in the south of the country, find themselves having to trek a significant distance east, into England, in order to travel south, before travelling west again into south Wales. As well as offering routes by train, car and bus, Liverpool also offers the possibility of travelling by sea to and from a range of locations along the north Wales coast. Historically, it is this geographical accessibility, coupled with Liverpool’s status as a port and as second city of the British Empire, that made it an attractive destination for economic migrants, both internal and external. It also served as a potential gateway to other parts of the world. In 1865, this made Liverpool the perfect departure point for the *Mimosa*, the vessel chosen to carry Welsh settlers to Patagonia to establish Wales’s only colony, y Wladfa (National Museums Liverpool n.d.) thereby linking the city to a key event in the history of the Welsh nation. Today, the Welsh living in north Wales, looking for the nearest “big” city, still tend to look to Liverpool for opportunities as wide ranging as studying at university, finding employment, going on nights out and for Christmas shopping. Industrialisation has led English economic migrants to reverse the journey for work, whilst others have moved for leisure or to retire to the slower pace of a rural existence. This has led to tensions between Welsh and English speaking

communities that saw English speakers “described publicly as 'like a form of foot and mouth disease' by a former adviser to the Welsh Assembly” (Richards 2004, 10).

Against this backdrop of fluid migration between Liverpool and north Wales, rather than identifying as a community with a hybridised Welsh/English identity, the Liverpool Welsh define themselves as a migrant Welsh language community located outside Wales “proud to be preserving [their] heritage and language” (Rees n.d.). They are led by the minister of the Welsh Presbyterian Capel Bethel, Dr D. Ben Rees, a leading authority on the history of the Liverpool Welsh community and universally acknowledged as a key driver in maintaining the group’s profile, particularly within the Welsh language community (Gower 2020). Due to diminishing congregations and maintenance costs, Capel Bethel was demolished in 2011 with the Sunday School room at the back of the original building being converted into a dual-purpose space encompassing both the new chapel and a newly created Liverpool Welsh Centre (*Liverpool Echo* 2011). With the creation of this Centre, there has been some broadening of activity, including the introduction of a weekly Welsh-language Learners Study Group (*Liverpool Welsh* n.d.). Still, the community’s profile within Liverpool remains much lower than that of the Irish.

A possible reason for this might be a decline in the community’s population. Once representing 10% of the inhabitants of Liverpool, the Cymry Lerpwl expat community has declined considerably over the last century to the point where only 4,771 people identified Wales as their country of birth in the 2011 census, a figure which, at that time, translated to roughly 1% of the population of Liverpool (*Office for National Statistics* 2013). This drop in numbers could be indicative of many things, not least of which would be Liverpool’s own variable fortunes over the last fifty years. In the 1970s and 1980s the city experienced a significant period of economic decline. During this time Liverpool was much less attractive to economic migrants. The resultant decline in population could therefore be a factor in its diminishing visibility in the city’s contemporary cultural life. If so, it would be reasonable to assume that the same effect would be observable for other migrant communities including Liverpool’s other prominent Celtic community, the Irish. The same census (2011) reveals that 4,978 of Liverpool’s inhabitants indicated they were born in Northern Ireland whilst 3,294 identified Ireland as their place of birth (*Office for National Statistics* 2013). Whilst almost twice the figure of the Welsh, this still only represented 1.8% of Liverpool’s population at that time. Yet there is little sign of a diminishment of the cultural influence of the Irish. Rather the city’s special status as Ireland’s unofficial capital, which also dates back to the nineteenth century, is celebrated each year in the form of the Liverpool Irish Festival, an event that seeks to “[bring] Liverpool and Ireland closer together using the arts and culture” (*Liverpool Irish Festival* n.d.). Primarily an English language community, Liverpool Irish events are more accessible to a wider group of individuals in the city interested in the Irish influence on Liverpool’s arts and cultural heritage.

Currently there is no equivalent festival celebrating the Liverpool Welsh community or the historic relationship between Liverpool and North Wales. In 2000, the BBC reported that Liverpool City Council had invited the National Eisteddfod (an annual Welsh cultural festival that includes competitions in music and poetry and which is, by some measures, the largest in Europe) to Liverpool in 2007 (BBC 2000). In 2004, this translated into a formal bid for the city of Liverpool to host the National Eisteddfod as part of the city’s 800th anniversary celebrations in 2007. In response, the then

Archdruid of Wales, Dr. Robyn Lewis, described the proposal as “stupid,” going on to tell *Good Morning Wales* that Liverpool was “not a city where the eisteddfod would want to leave its Welsh-speaking stamp” (BBC 2004). A key theme in his invective related to the timing of the bid which coincided with Liverpool’s application to be European Capital of Culture in 2008 and to the council’s insensitivity to the anger of the Welsh at the events surrounding the creation of Llyn Celyn reservoir in the mid-twentieth century. Dr Lewis went on to draft an amendment to the National Eisteddfod’s constitution to prevent the event from ever leaving Wales in the future, as “apart from a few Welsh speakers who may well be true to Wales, the vast majority are descendants of Welsh speakers who have been Scousified” (*North Wales Live* 2004). Key to understanding the anger expressed by the Welsh are the events surrounding the damming of Afon Tryweryn, a series of actions which caused “a deep scar that persists today” (Atkins 2018, 455).

As the UK industrialized and populations around urban areas grew, then the demand for water increased. The nineteenth and early twentieth century had seen municipalities acquire rural lands, usually by compulsory purchase but with little objection from local populations, to build dams and create reservoirs to meet their growing industrial and domestic needs. In Wales, Liverpool had created Llyn Efyrnwy in the 1880s to supply additional water to the city. In 1907 the Birkenhead Corporation Act saw the plans for Cronfa Alwen approved, with work completed in 1921, following a delay in construction to accommodate World War I (Jones 2017). Birkenhead is a town along the opposite bank of the River Mersey, around 2 miles from Liverpool by water. During this hiatus in the building of Alwen Reservoir, Birkenhead hosted one of the most famous National Eisteddfods in Welsh cultural history, that of the *Eisteddfod y Gadair Ddu* (the Eisteddfod of the Back Chair) in 1917 (Llwyd 2015).[1]

Gwladys, Cronfa Alwen. Photograph © Emyr John

By the mid-twentieth century, however, when the need to rebuild after the Second World War drove another search for water for the city, times had changed. This new swathe of reservoir projects included Manchester’s attempts to source water from Cumbria and Swansea Corporation’s plan to build a reservoir in the Gwendraeth Fach valley. All faced significant resistance from local communities, with Swansea bowing to

pressure and changing their plans in response (Atkins 2018, 456-457). In the case of Llyn Celyn, Liverpool's reservoir project, the plan was to dam the Tryweryn river, flooding the village of Capel Celyn and surrounding farms and displacing 48 residents in the process (Atkins 2018, 457). Despite protests, marches in Liverpool and North Wales and acts of sabotage, the damming of the river went ahead leaving "an indelible mark on the relations between the two nations that persists to this day" (Atkins 2018, 458). Following the flooding, in February 1962, Saunders Lewis. a founder and the former President of Plaid Cymru (himself Merseyside Welsh), gave a famous radio address, *Tynged yr Iaith* (*The Fate of the Language*) calling for action to preserve the Welsh language by securing it official status, a call that led to the formation of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (*The Welsh Language Society*). In 2005 Liverpool City Council issued an official apology for "the hurt of 40 years ago" (BBC, 2005). The apology was welcomed by Welsh First Minister Rhodri Morgan, with the then leader of Plaid Cymru, Elfyn Llwyd, suggesting that it "be accepted in the fulsome way it is being offered" (BBC 2005). Still, there were many who felt it represented too little and had arrived too late (Clark 2005).

"…mountains made of words and poetry and history, piled up on top of each other, like bits of Scrabble...tradition and oral history which you have to quarry to keep the memory…alive." (Jobbins 2011, 13-14) Llechwedd Quarry - Photograph © Emyr John

The events surrounding Tryweryn are crucial in understanding the current position of the Liverpool Welsh. In order to be "true to Wales" (*North Wales Live*, 2004), they must work to preserve the Welsh language as a key cultural indicator of Welsh identity. Numerous studies have demonstrated that "Welsh speakers [are] consistently…more aware of their Welshness…and [are] much less likely to consider themselves British" (Phillips 2005, 103). The centrality of the Welsh language to a Welsh identity "true to Wales" (*North Wales Live* 2004) can, however, be traced back to the nineteenth century. In *Beyond Identity? The Reconstruction of the Welsh*, R. Merfyn Jones (1992) tells us that historically the image of Wales created by newspapers and periodicals was not unlike that of many rural parts of Britain. Travel

writers like G. J. Bennet (1853) "described the Welsh as 'simple, honest and obliging'" while "George Borrow's *Wild Wales* strikes the modern reader as being effusive to the point of embarrassment." (1992, 331). There is a sense of a bucolic, beautiful, if rather backward, place of poor roads, charming vistas, small farms and cottage crafts. This was despite the lack of relevance of these images to the day-to-day living experiences of those in the increasingly industrialised south and north east. This was a reality readily recognised by Robert Graves in his 1929 publication *Goodbye to All That* which "contrasted the archaic and romanticized Wales of Owain Glyndwr…with the reality of chapels, Liberalism, the dairy and drapery business, slate mines, and the tourist trade" (Jones 1992 331). Unfortunately, regardless of the realities, this view of Wales as a primitive, rural country paved the way for a key event in Welsh history: *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision,* or *the Treachery of the Blue Books*.

The "Blue Books" were reports submitted by the commissioners of an enquiry into the state of education in Wales. In March 1846, the Member of Parliament for Coventry, William Williams, asked that a Commission be established to investigate the state of education in Wales and, "in particular to examine the means available for members of the working classes to obtain a knowledge of English" (Davies 2007, 379). As part of his appeal, Williams was particularly concerned by the fact that many areas of Wales only had access to Sunday Schools (Davies 2007, 379) describing the Welsh people as "a prey to designing hypocrites with religion on their lips and wickedness in their hearts" (cited in Williams 2012, 45-46). Published in 1847, the resulting *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education* (1847) became known colloquially as "The Blue Books" due to the colour of the covers of the three volumes. This investigation was carried out by three English commissioners who spoke no Welsh: they relied on the evidence of "witnesses," many of whom were Anglican clergy "embittered by the success of Nonconformity" (Davies 2007, 380). As John Davies explains in *A History of Wales*: "[a]lthough they were able and energetic men, Wales was wholly alien to them and they had no experience of teaching working-class children" (2007, 379).

Consequently, the Report was damning of a language it deemed "to be inferior and out-moded … the 'language of slavery' [that kept] the Welshman in an 'underworld of his own'" (Williams 2012, 46). It concluded that the Welsh were lazy, immoral and ignorant and that the causes of this were the Welsh Language and Nonconformity itself. Citing popular media responses to the publication of the Blue Books*,* Jane Aaron, in "Finding a voice in two tongues: gender and colonization", conjures up the ferocity of the rhetoric seized upon enthusiastically by the English public. Aaron cites reports in the English press that the Welsh "habits are those of animals and will not bear description" (1994, 198). In fact, the section of the Blue Books dedicated to these kinds of negative characterisations of the Welsh character represent a small section of the Reports themselves. Still, they proved to be a central focus of much of the discussion surrounding their findings "[giving] London Journals the opportunity to vilify the Welsh" (Davies 2007, 380). Rechristened as *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision* (*Treachery of the Blue Books*), the Report characterised the Welsh language and Nonconformity as "the sources of Welsh immorality" (Williams 2012, 45) and became notorious within Wales for offering justification for a series of initiatives designed to actively discourage the use of the Welsh language. In response, in the nineteenth century, there emerged an identity that Jones describes as "a distinctive Welsh self-image." This self-image:

> had at its core a religiocultural rather than a national discourse...Welshness thus became a cause to which one adhered, rather than a country to which one belonged. (Jones, 1992, 338)

Arising as it did in response to the Blue Books (1847), this "self-image" carried Liberalism's political aims and religious nonconformity's position as the defender of the Welsh language at its core (Jones 1992, 339). This sense that "the chapel[2] people were the only true Welsh" (Davies 2007, 380) made Nonconformism one of several key markers, of Welsh identity alongside "the eisteddfod, poetry, cerdd dant, [and] harp music" (Jones 1992, 350).

Another consequence of the events surrounding the "Blue Books" was their impact on perceptions of gender in Wales. They serve as an excellent example of Said's assertion that women's inequality in their own societies was used by men to reinforce the sense that these cultures were "barbaric" (Schrock 2013, 51). Via the Report's comments on morality, it is important to note the high levels of blame placed on Welsh women for what was perceived to be a disintegration of moral society. Ultimately, as Kirsti Bohata articulates in *Postcolonialism Revisited*, the assumption was of a "norm" that equated to the Established Anglican Church, masculinity and "Englishness" where "gender and nationality were conflated" thereby positioning women as figures of "national allegory" (2004, 61). As Deidre Beddoe states in *Out of the Shadows: A History of Women in Twentieth-Century Wales*, "the doctrine of separate spheres…was vigorously promoted in Wales, particularly after [this] attack on the morality of Welsh women" (2000, 12). This meant that women were "restricted to concerns about home and family, while at the same time the reason for doing so was projected as of the utmost public importance, the preservation of the nation's cultural identity" (Davies 1999, 94). This tendency to view "Woman" as a metaphor for Wales led to a "civilizationist mission in which women were the disseminators of the morality, sobriety, temperance that the bourgeoisie wished to foster" (Williams 2012, 4-5). Amongst other things, the mythologization of the "Mam" as the key figure responsible for maintaining the integrity of Welsh identity was key as "under her care home would be a centre of Christian virtue, moral purity and sobriety" (Beddoe 2000, 12). Deidre Beddoe offers a vivid image of this "icon of Welsh womanhood" in her recollections of her own grandmother:

> I recall my Cardiganshire grandmother…sitting reading her big Welsh Bible by the fireside every evening. She was a very devout woman, but a church-goer and not a chapel-goer. She disapproved of drinking, smoking and gambling…A tiny woman with her grey hair pulled into a bun, she was the personification of that icon of Welsh womanhood, the Mam. To me as a little girl, she was somehow 'holy' and I venerated her. (Beddoe 2000, 3)

Particularly associated with south Wales mining communities (Beddoe 2000, 13), it could be argued that the Welsh Mam transcends disparate forms of Welshness via class. She is "a long-suffering woman, keeping home and husband respectable in an intensely male world" (Jones 1992, 349). Nevertheless, ultimately her narrative is grounded in the patriarchal push towards domesticity exerted on women at the point of industrialization. Also, as she primarily exists within Wales, she reinforces a more modernist perspective of community and national identity as fixed entities that fulfil

specifically designated gender roles within the mainstream nationalist "Grand Narrative." Ultimately, as Aaron states:

> The late nineteenth-century Welsh woman seems, then, to have been presented with three possibilities in terms of choosing an identity. Either she…adopted the English middle-class model of refined femininity…or she defensively asserted her Welshness in the face of insult and…clad herself in the armour of strict propriety…or she accepted the English definition of herself as a libidinous hoyden of primitive Wild Wales. None of these possible identities afforded her a voice of her own. (Aaron 1994, 188)

As late as a hundred years after *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision*, actors like Rachel Thomas (*Proud Valley* 1940) and Edith Evans (*The Last Days of Dolwyn* 1949) were portraying the Welsh Mam in films that sought to project this as the "dominant image of womanhood" (Beddoe 2000, 137-138).

In some respects this particular religio-cultural version of Welshness represented by the Welsh language, the Welsh Mam, Liberal politics and Nonconformity, would not withstand the First World War (Jones 1992, 339). Still, as Segrott's 2001 study, *Language, geography and identity: The Case of the London Welsh* indicates, the religio-cultural practices associated with it have endured and remain significant for parts of the Welsh language community today (Segrott 2001, 288). Many of the published works of Dr D. Ben Rees, the foremost authority on the Liverpool Welsh, offer an insight into the their experience that similarly locates itself within this imagined "Welsh self-image" of nonconformist chapels and the Welsh language (Rees 2001, 2008, 2014). Published in 2008, for example, Rees's *Labour of Love in Liverpool: The History of the Welsh Congregation* is a predominantly masculine history of chapels and ministers, elders and Sunday School attendants. One of a series Rees has written documenting the history of the Liverpool Welsh congregations, these texts are currently the only books on this subject available in English. They are filled with nostalgia for a "home'" reified in photographs of, for example, a farmstead with a red phone box outside entitled "An old Welsh farmstead with a symbol of modernity" (Rees 2008, 53). In an interview, also in 2008, Rees expressed the hope that there would, once again, be a National Eisteddfod held in Liverpool. As one of the Welsh speakers in Liverpool who would be considered "true to Wales" (*North Wales Live* 2004), the desire to host the National Eisteddfod in the city once again is understandable. For the Cymry Lerpwl, these expressions of Welsh identity are key to understanding their presentation of themselves to the wider community. Yet, in the same interview Rees assessed the community's demographic in the following way:

> Today there is active support from a Liverpool Welsh community of between 4,000 and 5,000 people, around 80% of whom are Welsh speakers. But if you include people with Welsh blood in their veins going back four or five generations, there will be around 60,000 and 70,000. (Dr. D. Ben Rees, interviewed by Shipton 2008)

Based on the figures offered by Rees, this would seem to indicate that, in a city of around 466,415 people (Office for National Statistics 2013), only 1% of those with Welsh heritage are Welsh speakers with this percentage rising to around 15% if all with Welsh heritage are included. Applying this broadest definition of Liverpool Welsh

identity means that this figure surpasses the community's "heyday" when it represented 10% of the population of Liverpool in the nineteenth century (Shipton 2008). Yet, the Cymry Lerpwl's tendency to express themselves primarily via what Trosset (1986) defines as a "Welsh-Wales" identity can lead to feelings of alienation amongst the "Scousified" (*North Wales Live* 2004), English-speaking Liverpudlians of Welsh heritage as absent from these histories is any consideration of configurations of Welsh identity not part of that specific definition of Welshness. To the English-speaking, wider Liverpool community, these publications with their focus on these particular markers of Welsh identity strongly associate the cultural life of the Liverpool Welsh with the Capel Bethel congregation: the Welsh language and the ministers leading congregations in the Nonconformist tradition (*Liverpool Welsh* n.d.). Consequently, despite their having "been an integral part of the Liverpool scene since the heyday of the slave trade and the building of the docks in the last decade of the eighteenth century" (Rees 2014), many of the activities of the Cymry Lerpwl remain largely invisible to the English-speaking population of the city. Key historical events relevant to Liverpool's relationship to the Welsh that have often been of tremendous political importance to Wales as a nation, including Tryweryn, are notably absent, and so the English-speaking members of the Liverpool Welsh remain largely unaware of their community's importance to Welsh history or of the reason for any Welsh enmity. The strong emphasis placed on the Welsh language has the unintentional consequence that "much of what is interesting…goes on in Welsh…ideas are disseminated orally…almost by some cultural osmosis between friends and within families" (Jobbins 2011, 12). This would seem to suggest that Dr Robyn Lewis was right in his assessment that the National Eisteddfod might mean very little to those of Welsh ancestry in Liverpool. Ultimately, it would seem the Liverpool Welsh identity encompasses multiple versions of "Welshness" on a continuum from Welsh-Wales[3] chapel-goer to Welsh learner to English with Welsh heritage living in England to English-speaking of Welsh ancestry living in Wales. With the Liverpool Welsh as with the Welsh in general, as Jones asserts, Welsh identities "are plentiful."; however, "a Welsh identity…embraced by all…is proving to be harder to come by" (Jones 1992, 334).

"The Constant Anxiety of Not Belonging"[4]

For my part, I grew up in Liverpool in the 1970s and 1980s with a love of local history, well-versed in Nonconformist tradition via links to my local United Reformed Church, St Stephen's, Wavertree. Despite having a cousin in Flint and a great grandmother with the surname Hughes, in my youth, I ran past Capel Bethel's high windows without a thought to catch the bus at the Penny Lane bus shelter made famous in the Beatles' song. As one of the key buildings in the Penny Lane area of the city, Capel Bethel's architecture was so familiar to me as to be almost invisible. In 1990, I left the city of Liverpool to move to Cardiff, Wales's capital city, to begin actor training. Living away from Liverpool, I was struck by the often negative and extremely powerful reactions to any mention of my home city. Often these appeared at the sound of my Liverpudlian dialect, generating looks of suspicion from people too polite to vocalise their discomfort as they patted their pockets or searched in their bags distractedly, checking their valuables remained where they had last left them.

Simultaneously, I was struck by the fact, on the odd occasion I bumped into others from my hometown, that much to the chagrin of my southern English friends, we

Liverpudlians would respond to each other like long lost neighbours meeting “abroad.” We would share stories of “home,” with a nostalgia and romanticism usually preserved for ex-pat communities in far-flung foreign lands. Despite the grim reality of Liverpool’s well-documented decline during that period, our Liverpool was warm and filled with humour and local “characters.” I was drawn to conclude that, despite our being very definitely English, it was clear that culturally people from Liverpool expressed their sense of heritage a little differently. One day, early in my actor training, in a break between classes, I discussed my observations with a Welsh-speaking friend and it was he who introduced me to the Welsh concept of *hiraeth*. With no equivalent in English, *hiraeth* is often described in terms of nostalgia, homesickness or a yearning for a place or a time now lost. Yet it is so much more than that. Evoked very effectively by Welsh nationalists during Tryweryn, it is what it means to long for “home” and, crucially, for the Welsh, it is deeply connected to Wales “[symbolising] an emotional attachment to a natural landscape, a cultural place, and the connections between Welsh culture and its land” (Atkins 2018, 455). My Welsh-speaking friend was convinced that what I was experiencing for Liverpool was *hiraeth*. That conversation and many after it, led to the creation of a theatre company, Theatr Gadair Ddu, focused on exploring the community narratives arising from this particular strip of the north west of England and North Wales.

Investigating the Liverpool Welsh community as female and English-speaking has proved less than satisfactory. There were hints – shadows, spectres flickering in the margins – but I struggled to find images I could recognise, of myself or of my family. It was apparent the only documentation preserved as relevant to the life of the community was linked to maintaining existing societal power structures (Thompson 1998, 22). In some respects, this is understandable. Any archival search is bound to limit the possibilities of the stories that can be told. Minutes of chapel meetings, like any other historical records, have been created based on what those in power deem to be important. As a direct consequence, “the very power structure worked as a great recording machine shaping the past in its own image” (Thompson 1998, 22), and that image was white, male, straight and, in this case, Welsh-speaking. As I read, I longed to see my people, and to be “seen” (Aston 1999, 18). I wanted to witness my foremothers making their “shattering entry into history” (Cixous 2009, 420). The more I researched, the more I found I was drawn to the following question: ‘how can we reveal our place, first as it is bequeathed to us by tradition, and then as we want to transform it?’ (Kristeva 1981 [1979], as cited in Aston 1999, 10).

In search of a solution, I found myself drawn to the opportunities the liminality of performance offers in the form of an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications…a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 1994, 4). As an English, Welsh-language learning, female actor, I found myself in the midst of conflict with multiple potential identities. This challenge was one not that dissimilar to the one facing the Liverpool Welsh and Wales as a whole, namely to “unite this Anglophone identity with the Welsh-speaking part of the population” (Johnes 2015, 676). McCrone argues that marginal communities such as this can offer “much better opportunities for understanding that identities are, in essence, negotiation cases used as people attempt to steer paths through processes of acceptance and affirmation” (2002, 317). Performance offers the opportunity to create a “Third Space” (Bhabha 1994, 38) within which such negotiations surrounding

hybridised forms of cultural distinctiveness can play out in a community existing in “the interstices of nationhood…the margins of the nation space” (Bhabha 1997).

Rarely discussed, an aspect of their identity fundamental to Liverpool Welsh communication of themselves is their sense of exile. At one time due to poor transport links and the foreignness of the second city of the Empire, this sense of existing on the margins of Wales has been exacerbated since the events of Tryweryn, when Welsh nationalists cast Liverpool in the role of colonial aggressor. In “Said’s Exile: Strategic Insights for Postcolonial Feminists,” Ling’s focus is “the social relations of power that bind the supposed dichotomy of exile versus home” (Ling 2007, 136). The exile loses “‘home’ as a space and so characterises themselves as standing on the outside, looking in. This enables them to preserve, with fixed, clearly defined borders, ‘home’ as a reified, enduring and fixed memorial whilst at the same time viewing exile as ‘lacking, liminal and constantly trying to catch up’” (Ling, 2007, 136). Ling proposes four analytical categories as a means of organising Said’s treatment of the subject of exile: Space, Time, Knowledge/Power and Desire. Like strata, structures of knowledge/power are layered into time and space, with the fixed nature of an exile’s vision of home juxtaposed with their view of their exiled state as provisional and so open to reinterpretation. This exiled status, coupled with the conflation of gender and national identity since the Blue Books (Bohata 2004, 61) suggests that any attempt to shed new light on the multiplicity of identities at work within the Liverpool Welsh population must focus on the women of the community. Neglected thus far, until this imbalance in their representation is addressed, the Liverpool Welsh remain in danger of only being able to reproduce a past that is “malestream” (Aston 1999, 7).

Gwladys, Blaenau Ffestiniog. Photograph © Emyr John

As an actor trained within the UK Drama school system in Western text-based acting techniques, I developed a skill for character-led devising. Key to my initial creative process was the need to research the socio-religious experiences of the women of the Liverpool Welsh community. Once I had developed some sense of this “world,” I began integrating contemplative acting techniques drawn from Lee Worley’s work on Mudra Space Awareness (2001) and Japanese actor Yoshi Oida’s preparatory

exercises on presence (1997) with my research findings to create a series of studio and site-specific exercises. These exercises were designed to develop an embodied experiential narrative: walking, journeying and looking, observing from the outside, from the position of the Other. I began by walking in places already familiar to me via my family's narratives about growing up in 1920s Liverpool. Talking into my phone, I created a series of audio reflections as I walked. Then I moved into the rehearsal room, experimenting with key symbols of cultural importance to both communities and with materials central to female experience – wool and flour, for example. Inspired by the Nazca Needle and Thread Mirror Labyrinth (Lonegren 2007, 22), I created labyrinthine forms from the Liver Bird and the Welsh Dragon as walking meditations and I collected postcards, photographs, any fragments that could offer some glimpse of a presence, of the women hidden behind the formal histories. I worked with these artifacts in the studio, fictionalising from fragments using "criteria internal to the cultural and intellectual frameworks that [generated them]" (Bentley 1999, 143) to visualize a new Liverpool Welsh woman: one who could journey through the histories with the community into the present day. Ultimately when she arrived, she came to me first as an image in a dream:

"ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Peter: 2:9) Photograph © Geof Atwell

There were moments when she hovered at the periphery and I felt her vanish if I moved too quickly. Initially the 'script' emerged as a set of physical actions without language. It became clear that an external, critical observer was required so I enlisted the support of a first-language, Welsh-speaking dramaturg who asked questions as I moved through a score of physical actions. Speech came haltingly but there was music. Gwladys, as she became known, could sing!

A child-less teacher, trained and working in Liverpool and one of the surplus two million unmarried women left alone after the First World War (Nicholson, 2008), Gwladys emerged as a composite, an antithesis to Mother Wales, representing Welsh national identity in microcosm with "an awareness which comes with contrapuntal

understanding" (Vinay Lal, cited by Ling 2007, 135). This contrapuntal understanding is central to the explorations needed to reconcile the diverse contemporary concepts of Liverpool Welshness and in so doing to confer on the women of this community "a place other than…silence" (Cixous 2009, 420). Without a husband and robbed of the opportunity to build the family society expected from her, she is a woman deliberately designed not to fit comfortably into the revered Welsh image of maternal femininity "under [whose] care, home would be a centre of Christian virtue, moral purity and sobriety" (Beddoe 2000,12). Ultimately, the piece that emerged from these explorations was called *Cartref (At Home*). Designed to be performed in the kitchen of my local church, the performance sought to explore notions of home and domesticity. Not simply a linguistic description of a location, like *hiraeth*, the word *cartref* is suggestive of a feeling of being ' "at home." Set against the backdrop of the 1929 National Eisteddfod, the last to be hosted by Liverpool, Gwladys is a member of the congregation of the recently built Capel Bethel. When we meet her, she is in the chapel kitchen baking Bara Brith, a traditional Welsh loaf, and preparing a funeral tea. A 20-minute version of the piece was previewed during Edge Hill University's Festival of Ideas in 2017 where feedback for the character was positive. One audience member reflected:

> The piece captures the atmosphere of a nonconformist community very well…[with a] good sense of location. This is a woman we recognise. (Audience feedback to Theatr Gadair Ddu)

It is this concept, coupled with the examples of *hiraeth* referred to earlier in this paper, that the piece seeks to interrogate as the performance progresses.

In June 2018, again with Theatr Gadair Ddu, we designed an installation as an extension of the themes already explored in *Cartref* and created to accompany the now-extended performance on a tour of venues significant to the Liverpool Welsh community. Presented as a self-contained exhibition at the Arts Centre at Edge Hill University, *Cegin y Capel* (*The Chapel Kitchen*) combined mundane, "found" pieces of significance to the Liverpool Welsh community with artifacts generated as part of the creative process for *Cartref*.

Photograph ©Helen Newall

At the entrance to the exhibition was an open Welsh-language Bible and a hymnary, open at the Welsh hymn, 'Arglwydd, arwain trwy'r anialwch' ('Lord, Lead Me Through the Wilderness', sung to Cwm Rhondda). To the right of the Bible was an area

dedicated to Gwladys which included an image from Cartref and a series of photographs taken at Cronfa Alwen, walking on the outskirts of Blaenau Ffestiniog and looking out over Llechwedd Quarry. Washed with sepia, these images juxtaposed Gwladys with the contemporary Welsh landscape.

The exhibition culminated in *Dwylo Mam* (*Mam's Hands*), a short film representing a child's perspective of their Mam making Bara Brith. The film was projected onto brickwork at the centre of an area with two chairs and a table set with cups, saucers and plates with some partially-consumed Bara Brith. As the film flickers the noises generated by the actions of the woman baking are the only sound heard. They occupy the whole room.

Presented in England and almost exclusively attended by non-Welsh speakers, some of whom were part of the English-speaking Liverpool Welsh community, the response to the exhibition was overwhelmingly positive. Visitors reflected on their own experiences, associating the images with their own memories of family and home. They reflected favourably on the meditative atmosphere created by the film. Comments made to Theatr Gadair Ddu staff stewarding the exhibition included:

> "No Kenwood Chef to help with your kneading then – that's how my Mum did it." "My aunty always wore a hat like that. Everywhere!"

During the course of the two years spent producing the *Cartref* and *Cegin y Capel*, Gwladys emerged as a symbol of sorts ("*Gwlad*" in Welsh means "Country"). She became for many, a "site that intersects material and symbolic powers" (Lewis 2004, 172) where the present body is "read against what has been seen" (Giannachi, et al. 2012, 15). Through her presence, she directed "attention outside the self into the social and the spatial, toward the enactment of co-presence" (Giannachi, et al. 2012, 1), inviting audiences to reflect on their own experiences of Welsh-ness. This "enactment of co-presence" is key to discovering ways to open up the definitions of Liverpool Welsh identity so that its multiple expressions can co-exist "in ecologies of differences…performed in the persistence of 'being' across division and differentiation" (Giannachi, et al. 2012, 10-11).

On the 7th August 2020, Liverpool City Councillor Jay Roberts tweeted:

> The Eisteddfod was […] in full swing 91 years ago in Sefton Park. This beautiful poster by Harry Hughes Williams celebrated the last time it was held outside Wales. Maybe it could be brought back for the centenary in 2029?! (@JayRoberts86)

Responses to the tweet ranged from positive retweets with expressions of delight for the quality of the poster ("Wow what a gorgeous poster" @KMTPhotographer) to surprise at the fact that Liverpool had hosted the event ("I didn't know about this. Did you" @KenPerry47) to a reminder of the rift that had prevented the National Eisteddfod coming to Liverpool in 2007 for the city's 800th Anniversary ("Would be good to see the city properly address Tryweyn beforehand – gotta earn the Eisteddfod." @arthrowl).

Even with Liverpool's yearning for a better connection with one of its Celtic motherlands, the wounds of past colonial encounters still run deep. For Wales, the complexities of its history as a principality coupled with the divergent definitions of Welsh identity make it difficult for a consensus to be found. In his latest history of the Liverpool Welsh, yet to be published in English (*Merseyside Heritage* 2020), Dr D. Ben

Rees indicates that there were some Cymry Lerpwl who, far from objecting to the flooding, were in fact in favour of it due to the improvements it would make to Liverpool's water supply (Gower 2020). Elsewhere in Wales, *"Cofiwch Dryweryn*" ("Remember Tryweryn") has evolved into an enduring Welsh nationalist rallying cry, with graffiti first created by Meic Stephens in 1965, regularly restored, and repainted (Atkins 2018, 465; BBC 2020; Addley 2019).

Last summer (2019), when I was driving through Wales, I saw a "*Cofiwch Dryweryn*" flag hanging outside a garage near Bala on a route popular with English tourists thereby, once more, marking the border that keeps the Liverpool Welsh in exile to this day. Conversely, this year, I passed the same garage to see the red flag of "*Cofiwch Dryweryn*" replaced with one charging passersby to "Protect the NHS" (National Health Service). When restrictions were lifted in Wales following lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, First Minister, Mark Drakeford, sent a personal message to the people of Liverpool telling us: "our country is back open to you" (Traynor 2020). Ultimately, the Welsh people have "never simply and completely opposed" English (or indeed Liverpudlian) society (Ashcroft, et al 1998, 12-13). Following the lifting of performance restrictions, Theatr Gadair Ddu will be going on tour with *Cartref* and *Cegin y Capel* to a range of locations in Liverpool and North Wales as "a way of making testimony…a declaration of what we can imagine" (Chaikin 1991, 2). It is our hope that in sharing Gwladys' Bara Brith with a range of "Liverpool Welsh" we can wrest the narratives of this socio-religious community from the hands of the few generating a multi-vocal history more representative of the Liverpool Welsh community that will bring Welsh- and English-speaking Wales one step closer to healing the "deep scar that [still] persists today" (Atkins 2018, 455).

Notes

1. The climax of the National Eisteddfod is the Chairing ceremony when the Chief Bard is announced. A new chair, made of wood and ornately carved, is created each year. The Chairing ceremony is overseen by the Archdruid who announces the winner using their nom de plume (in this case Fleur de Lys). Following the announcement, trumpets are sounded calling for the winner to identify themselves by standing to come forward. This is usually the point when the identity of the poet is first revealed. In 1917 at the National Eisteddfod at Birkenhead, the chair was won by Ellis Humphrey Evans, (bardic name Hedd Wyn). The trumpets calling for the winning bard to step forward were sounded three times. When the poet did not step forward, it was announced that the he had been killed in action. A black cloth was draped over the chair and it was presented to his family with the cloth still in place. The subject of his poem (*Yr Arwr – The Hero*) along with this unique break with eisteddfod tradition has made the Eisteddfod y Gadair Ddu very famous with extensive commemorations taking place in 2017 marking the centenary of his death.
2. In Wales the term "chapel" refers almost exclusively to Nonconformist places of worship, defined as such in contrast to the Anglican Church in Wales.
3. The term "Welsh-Wales" is used here as a shorthand to refer to first language Welsh speakers who now live in Liverpool.

4. This is a phrase originally drawn from an audio recording made at the Pier Head in Liverpool as part of a walking meditation completed during the devising process for *Cartref*.

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