

Introduction

Nina Davies

You're listening to Future Artefacts FM , a bi-monthly podcast/broadcast featuring speculative fiction audio works by artists and writers produced and presented by Nina Davies,

Rebecca Edwards

Rebecca Edwards

Niamh Schmidtke

and Niamh Schmidtke, on RTM

ND

and also available on podcast channels.

NS

The programme focuses on fictional works intended for broadcast to carve out a better understanding of the now by exploring various interpretations of the future.

RE

Together with guests we discuss the mechanics of different types of storytelling to reveal the complexities of contemporary culture. Let's get started.

All

Let's get started.

Artist Introduction

ND

Welcome back to future artifacts. FM, as per usual, I'm your host. Nina Davies,

RE

Rebecca Edwards,

NS

and Niamh Schmidtke, although this time I'm in the hot seat for episode 30 of our little baby radio show, which is no longer a little baby radio show.

RE

The big three oh.

ND

Yeah, exactly. I remember my 30th birthday, and it took me a lot longer to get to than this episode. So yeah, we're not actually celebrating today.

NS

Well, it's a partial celebration because we're starting a new mini series. We had a bit of a break over the summer with Sulay's really wonderful *black holes act one* radio play, and now we're coming back for the winter with a new series of works that are all around the theme of *a chorus*.

A bit of context about the mini series before we start today's episode:

How does singing tell a story? How are our bodies intrinsic to the expression of pitch, tone or duration of a note? How do individual voices dissipate into a group of singers, the volume rising from a crowd of chanters or the controlled Unison of trained harmonies in a choir. How does this perspective translate to artists whose collaborative process goes beyond the baseline level of working together to something more akin to developing together?

For this mini series, we're exploring the types of narratives inherent to songs, music scores and group singing. From Greenham Common Songbook to Nina Simone's *Mississippi Goddam*, singing has long been a form of resistance, both articulating injustice faced and providing an outlet for the violence of that injustice. *A Chorus* points to both the group of people who may sing these songs together, and the impact the repetition has on its singers.

Singing together has long been used as a tool for synchronisation in workspaces, from sea shanties that coordinated sailors' movements to field songs that kept laborers in rhythm, these occupational songs don't just pass the time. They harness the physical power of music to move ships, shape tasks and unify collective effort. Together, we're exploring several artists' works which prioritise collaboration, acting like a choir, their individual contributions becoming an ensemble.

ND

So we're going to kick off the series with Niamh's work. And the idea for this mini series sort of came from, or sort of kicked off, from, your work, really. So it feels fitting that we're sort of starting the mini series with your work. Niamh.

RE

So just to introduce Niamh, Niamh Schmidtke (b. Dublin 1997, they/she) is an artist, lecturer and arts facilitator based across London and Limerick. They explore the politics of green washing, economic jargon and the language of democracy through speculation, audio, ceramics and installations, centring intimacy as a form of decolonial praxis. They examine the relationship between listening and speaking, to consider the kinds of voices that deep time, the sea, or humans could have with one another. They currently lecture in the School of Architecture, Limerick, with an MFA from Goldsmiths, London and BA from LSAD. Awards include; Agility Award, Material Futures Residency at Cove Park Scotland and the European Investment Bank's (EIB) Artist Development fund. They have exhibited across Ireland and internationally including TULCA; Salvage Agency, Galway (2024), Pulling Blood from a Stone (solo), Science Gallery Berlin (2024), DARE 2019, Orpheus Institute, Belgium and PULSE, Limerick City Gallery (2022). Their work is held in public and private collections, including the EIB's permanent collection. They are a member of Lewisham Arthouse artists' co-op where they co-organise the Graduate Award with Sara Willet.

ND

And so today we are, would you say we're premiering the work?

NS

Yeah, it's new work. It's a part of a longer research project. But this is the first,...there was one iteration, which I'll talk about maybe as we get into the conversation. But this is the premiering of the audio component, which I'd say is kind of a translation and repackaging of performance work that happened in the summer.

ND

Okay, great. And the title, which I realise I haven't said yet is *Chanter Aughinis*, which is a, it's a 15, roughly 15 minute work. And I'm sort of tempted to go straight into questions, but I'm wondering whether we should just, whether we should give everyone a chance to listen to the work first before we head in.

NS

The one thing I'll say just before you listen to the work is listen with your eyes closed, if you can. I think for this piece in particular, it's requiring... no, let me rephrase that, yeah, listen with your eyes closed if you can, because there's a lot of visualisation that happens in the piece.

ND

Don't listen with your eyes closed. If you are crossing the street or driving.

NS

No, if you're still, if you're still somewhere, yeah.

ND

Okay, great. Well, we'll give that a listen, and we'll see you on the other side.

Work: Chanter

Spoken: There's about six verses. Will I do all the verses? Okay, absolutely, whenever you're ready.

Sung:

Where the river meets the sea. That's the estuary. Where the river meets the sea. That's my sanctuary. Where the river meets the sea. That's the place I long to be. Where the river meets the sea. That's the estuary, my sanctuary, I long to be.

Spoken:

You are on a salt marsh, at a small clearing with enough space for 2 cars to park. The ground is levelled where the cars are, but gets boggy within 5 paces towards the water line. You will hear the squelch as you move closer.

Above the water line are grassy areas. Sometimes birds rest here, although not for long since no fish can live in this water. Today there is a heron scanning the shoreline for a water creature young enough to keep living.

Tracing your gaze farther upwards are two smoke stacks. They are grey and sprouting from a larger factory, made up of a large grey rectangle, covered in corrugated steel. From this far away it is not possible to make out people, or the windows they might look out of. All we see of the refinery is grey, smoke and the stacks. To the left, in between the sky and the green of the salt marsh, is a sharp red line. Red like terracotta clay, the line extends several hundred meters to the left of the smoke stack. It appears thick from here, and must be deep up close. It has the consistency of clay, but unlike terracotta, cannot be touched with bare skin. From across the water, you could guess that the red line is about 2 meters deep, if you were close enough to touch it.

Sung:

Where the river meets the sea. That's the estuary. Where the river meets the sea. That's my sanctuary. Where the river meets the sea. I stand still

and I feel free. Where the river meets the sea. That's the estuary, my sanctuary, I long to be.

Spoken:

You are in the nearby town of Foynes, on the viewing deck of the sea planes museum, 3 flights of stairs up from the ground floor. It is June, there is no rain, and the clouds gently disperse the light across the greens, blues and browns of the locality. There are a set of free binoculars that direct your gaze towards the Shannon Estuary, the river where 1940s movie stars once landed after their stretch across the Atlantic.

Twisting your body clockwise, there are several container boats in the harbour, their containers are at different stages of being loaded onto local trucks. Following where those boats meet the horizon is a collection of machinery, fading into the distance in its pale orange hue, as though a stage from Mad Max has been transplanted to the west of Ireland. Metal that was once silver or grey in colour, is now like rust.

The most prominent structures are 2 striped stacks, with a grey shorter stack to their right, emitting a tall, slender pillar of smoke, blending in with the white clouds as it travels upwards. To the left of the stacks are thin tracks, several meters above ground level, to transport aluminium out of the refinery. From this distance, it looks like a rollercoaster, bauxite, waste and chemicals gliding with glee several stories above the earth. The refinery is expansive, stretching out along the view towards the estuary. To the right of the container ships are several long metal buildings, their roofs are just below the horizon line, making the red line of bauxite waste visible from this angle.

As you continue turning your body clockwise, the waste continues, a red line above the industrial buildings of the port, framing their potential global export. When gazing at this line through the binoculars, large scale machinery is visible. Spindly crane shapes, thick and deep tracks of tractors, and that orange rust, terracotta hue coating everything. The tracks of these machines might mean that the ground is not stable, moist enough to slide, or for heavy objects to sink into. Their spreading of gravity enabling further dumping, toxicity and expansion.

Sung:

Where the river meets the sea. That's the estuary. Where the river meets the sea. That's my sanctuary. Where the river meets the sea. Nature lives in harmony. Where the river meets the sea. That's the estuary, my sanctuary, I long to be.

Spoken:

You are standing in front of a river, after walking through a small field of cattle for the past five minutes. The view to the river was partially obscured by bushes and short trees, emerging through the flora to an expansive sky, and concrete banking either side of the water. Approaching the edge, you notice the steep drop down, and a set of stairs overgrown with nettles and thorns. The railings attempting to stop your entry have a sign, alerting you to poor water quality.

Stepping up and over the railings, there is a narrow path, littered with plants dehydrated in summer's heat. They're overgrown, a sign of the locals following the warnings you're ignoring. 20 steps down, you arrive at a 2 meter wide concrete bank, the water's tide is roughly half a meter below our feet. The river is 8 meters wide at this point, the other side flanked by another 2 meter wide concrete bank. The river's edge closest to you has a fast current, sped up by the built up river bed at this side, meaning you need to either time how you get out of the water, or walk to the shallower edge where you can easily step out.

Quickly stripping, you wander to the shallow end of the river, the side farthest from the steps where you entered. The water is cool, and you're careful for your head to not go under the water, the fear of the ignored signs remains a ghost on your mind. There is a family sharing the river with you this time. You heard them on your approach. 2 young boys, their mother, father and the children's grandfather. The older boy is confident at swimming, lapping the 10 meter length of river contained by the concrete banks. His mother is washing her hair, the suds travelling down the water, towards the town of Askeaton. The boy's father is climbing onto the opposite bank, towards a set of concrete steps with rusted railings leading up to a diving platform. The platform is at least 3 meters above the water

level. Without hesitation he leaps off the edge, arms circling wide, then pointed above his head, hitting the water as a single point with a gentle splash.

Sung:

Where the river meets the sea. That's the estuary. Where the river meets the sea. That's my sanctuary. Where the river meets the sea. Nature lives in harmony. Where the river meets the sea. That's the estuary, my sanctuary, I long to be.

Spoken:

You're being driven on the road between Askeaton and Ballysteen, turning off the motorway, the road narrows. Lines of trees on both sides of the road disperse the light reaching the road. They also obscure the view to the refinery, to the left, easily visible from the passenger seat.

The long, terracotta horizon has stopped surprising you now, extending always further than expected, covered by several minutes of driving through this small country road. In the past year the line has grown. From this distance it doesn't appear as ominous, the changes scaled by distance as a few centimetres, rather than the meters of sprawl that are visible up close. The line is thick, traversed by machines with wide tracts to stop them sinking while they pollute the land.

You keep scanning, in your usual morbid fascination, the waste. Today there are a group of people, visible only due to their numbers, all wearing white, reflective in the June sunshine. The group moves slowly, your distance from them makes the time appear to pass more slowly. You and the driver change routes and decide to drive closer to the refinery. As the car changes direction, you look across the steering wheel, continuing to gaze at this group in white, surprised that the red sludge they're traversing hasn't consumed their white to the same rust as the rest of the refinery.

Farther down the road, arriving at the entrance of the refinery, there are a second group of people dressed in white, this time the hem of their clothing is stained deep red. Not like blood, but the colour of haematite minerals being split open, like the red iron oxide dust mixed with water and painted

into bricks, or to seal homes or the colour of the railings you gripped to step down to the river for swimming. You unwillingly roll down the car windows, removing the streaked glass as an obstruction to your view, and the sound of song fills the car.

The group in white sways slightly, facing each other, watching for the rise and fall of the song. The movement of inhale and exhaled breath is exaggerated due to the long loose layers that they are wearing. They are circling around one person. This person's voice is deep, more audible than the remainder, more confident, and stronger. The people vary across age, gender and ethnicity, each wearing long white layers of clothing. You step out of the car, their voices lulling you forwards, gazing at the circular shape of people who are all gazing at one another. When you are closer, you notice their wrists are all connected by soft cotton strips of fabric, they are a paler red than the refinery's waste, leaving a slight residue on their skin, it is too high on their bodies to be from this site. Their shoes are damp, red, as are the bottoms of their white layers. While taking in the colours they are wearing the group opens out to a line, more clearly showing their connected wrists. Maintaining the song, breath in and out, they curl into each other, the confident singer remains still as the person to their left, and that person's left, slowly building a spiral around this stronger voice.

When the spiral is formed, there are 3 layers of people between you and the central singer. The group raises their arms, singing to the estuary, red dripping from their wrists and their feet. As the chorus repeats more people join them, forming protective rings around the choir. Voices in and out of tune blend into the original group, you feel yourself pulled towards them, joining in song, linking with strangers who are similarly transfixed by this action. More cars are behind you, the refinery's management try to break you apart, some members start recording the group, evidence of our peacefulness in case of arrest. By this stage there are over 10 layers of people protecting the central choir, and singers from sharing their song. You hold fast, allowing the chorus to repeat and repeat and repeat.

Sung:

Where the river meets the sea. That's the estuary. Where the river meets the sea. That's my sanctuary. Where the river meets the sea. Nature lives in harmony. Where the river meets the sea. That's the estuary, my sanctuary, I long to be.

Conversation

ND

Welcome back. I hope you enjoyed listening to *Chanter Aughinis* by our very own Niamh Schmidtke. To kick things off, could you just talk about why you decided to choose the Shannon estuary as a site for this work?

NS

Yeah, well, I was very kindly invited to do a residency at Askeaton Contemporary Arts last summer by Michelle **Harrigan** and Askeaton is on the south side of the Shannon estuary. It's very close to Limerick city, where I studied, but also spent quite a lot of time working.

Also within my role in research in the School of Architecture in Limerick, we've been looking a lot at futures around the Shannon estuary and thinking about that in terms of climate breakdown and climate crisis and what types of interventions or industries exist in the space. And so when I was invited to do the residency in Askeaton, I did a site visit back in spring to kind of figure out what I wanted to work on.

And the things that really struck me while there was this aluminum refinery, Aughinis, which is on the Shannon estuary. If anyone looks up Shannon airport on Google Earth view, you'll see this big red scar. Or if you look up Aughinis actually, on Google Earth, you'll see this big red scar in the landscape. And so I became really interested in the presence of the refinery on the edge of the town, which is why you hear all the audio descriptions of it, to try and give you a sense of what does this actually look like. It's quite ominous.

Also with the Shannon estuary. You know historically, it connects Limerick city, which is in the west of Ireland, but kind of relatively inland to the

Atlantic Ocean. It's the largest river in Ireland. It's where the Vikings first came to Ireland. There's a Norman castle in Askeaton from the 1300s... because of the river, there's kind of flood plains, which means the land and Limerick is quite fertile, so that it's easier to farm and to grow things.

There's quite a lot of kind of mythology and culture around the river, and I think historically, it feels quite important to... I guess, particularly the identity of people living around the Shannon, but also, more generally, like an Irish identity, whether as now there's all this conversation about putting, you know, wind turbines in the water, about using tidal energy, and also kind of industrialisation that happened in the kind of the 1970s primarily with with places like Aughinis, which is the largest aluminum refinery in Europe, which is interesting, because aluminum is not mined in Ireland.

So, yeah, it was primarily brought about through the residency. But also, the last year to two years of research that I've been doing in the School of Architecture in Limerick as well.

ND

Can I also ask you about the song that features within, within the work? Is that a song that you have written yourself, or is it a song that already exists?

NS

Yeah, so the other side of working in Askeaton was I got to work with this incredible local singer called Bernadette Hayes. This song about the Shannon estuary, this is her song. She describes it as something that came to her. She didn't write it. It just emerged. Bernadette is incredible. She's just retired from being a midwife, and there's this kind of warmth that she brings to everything that she does, and it's a kind of gospel, it almost sounds sort of gospel like. And she lives in this town called Ballystein, which is really close to Askeaton, which is on the Shannon estuary, and has this very deep connection to the local environment, and particularly to the river. Which I was then interested in with terms of, like, the contrast between pollution on the river versus the enjoyment towards it... kind of that deep connection to place.

I should say, the process of making the work was very, very collaborative. In terms of, when I went on the residency, I met with Bernadette, and we started doing vocal warm ups together. She sung this song to me while we were standing on the Shannon estuary. So this very embodied feeling. And then later on, in the audio piece, when you start to hear groups of voices singing together, that's the Inbher Glen Community Choir. So Glen is also along the Shannon estuary. And Inver means estuary in Irish, which is the choir that Bernadette leads. So this, none of this work would be possible without Bernadette.

RE

Yeah, maybe we'll come on more to Bernadette and how this kind of came to her, and what that might mean. But if we're thinking about your work as a song in the sense that we hear Bernadette singing the chorus, and the spoken word is the verse, I suppose. In the first verse, a character paints this picture of a red line of pollution in relation to the aluminum refinery, and they call it a red substance, and it's toxic and it cannot be touched. And I was just wondering how much of a fiction is this?

NS

In terms of the refinery and the toxicity? None of that is a fiction. All of that is true, which was the thing that shocked me the most. Typically, when you have refineries or processing facilities within the EU there's very tight regulations around what you can do with that waste. And especially in Europe, we have a big issue of exporting our waste abroad. The refinery operates by bauxite, which primarily is shipped in from Ghana, and this is where the estuary also comes in as a very useful tool. The Shannon is quite a wide and a deep river, so it's very easy for large cargo ships to actually come down the river. And so what happens with the refinery is bauxite is imported into Aughinis from Ghana.

NS

A series of chemicals are added to the bauxite mineral, the rock, to break it apart into kind of dust and fragments. The aluminum is either, I assume, smelted, or it's sifted. So oftentimes they'll refine minerals through the varying weights or the densities of metal versus other types of elements. What's left behind after the aluminum is taken away, is this red dust, which

they then mix into kind of a slurry that looks and feels well, I'm assuming feels because it's too toxic to touch, like terracotta. That was kind of how I materially was trying to connect with it in terms of clay, it's something that I understand really well.

Because of EU regulation, it has to be raked. So you have these big tractors that are kind of raking the land, which is kind of also why you hear these. You hear descriptions of kind of weird tractor, like shapes. So they actually have to come and, like, stream it, so that it moves somehow, and they lay it on top of each other. So it just becomes this thicker and thicker layer over time, and it grows and grows and grows. So you see it as this line that kind of sits above the horizon, which feels surreal. I think that's part of why I wanted to think about it as a speculative fiction, because it doesn't feel like something that should be happening. And I think speculation as a tool is quite interesting to draw your attention to... That's art.

I mean, kind of when we talked about the new weird last year as well, like that strangeness drawing our attention to that strangeness of, you know, waste being left on the land, I think particularly in this Irish context, because everything around it is so green, and you're around the estuary, and it's very touristy and picturesque. But, you know, Askeaton is also a working class town, and, you know, there isn't the same level of agency to turn down jobs.

ND

So I think there is something kind of quite weird or strange about the aesthetics of agriculture being used on toxic waste, in a sense of normalising it because we're used to seeing soil with tractor lines. So to see waste being formatted and laid down like its soil is a way of normalising that this stuff is still there.

RE

But the way the press have talked about it like "Red Mud Fears in West Limerick". Or what's another one here? The red sludge, like it that feels to me very sci-fi and very on a kind of on a par with that kind of language and that kind of thinking. So there is a familiarity, but there's also this like abnormality. I think that's there.

NS

Yeah, and I think very much kind of like out of sight, out of mind politics by those who are not living in the area, but then when you're there, yeah, I was so, I was so struck by it in the site visit, I just, I couldn't...

I kept on drawing red lines in my studio for months, just trying to figure out, what does that what does that mean? You know, kind of, I guess there's this question about toxicity of also, like NIMBY politics, not in my backyard. People not wanting the dump in their backyard, people not wanting the incinerator in their backyard. People not wanting the means of producing, like technology, because, you know, any bit of can that you have, like, that's aluminum, right?

And as we become more reliant on contemporary technologies within mobile phones or renewable infrastructures, which I think is sort of maybe like an undercurrent of research I'm thinking about, but not explicit in this work. We require these types of spaces for the supposedly clean world that we get to live in, in cities, but we don't want to reckon with, like the violence or the sludge of them when they're in a rural context. It's like, "oh no. It should all be clean and pristine". It's like, but it can't. It can't be.

And I think I was quite... one of the things. I was really interested in with this work and with my time in Askeaton is, obviously, when you're an artist on a residency, you're a visitor. You come to a place for a certain length of time and you leave, kind of like the residency requires you to leave at a certain point. Or if you stay like you're not the resident artist anymore. And so what happens when you stay continuously in that waste, in the view of that waste, how do you reconcile with that type of violence, or that type of viewpoint constantly?

And that's that's why, kind of the piece is sort of rooted in this song by Bernadette. And I think also we spoke about like a feeling of a place. And I think the reason why that comes through is because it's so rooted in Bernadette's experience of the Shannon estuary, it felt very important that, obviously I'm a visitor. And you know, as an artist, you think visually, and you connect critical theory to visual outcomes and all that type of stuff, but how your body lives in specific geographies, such as what it means to grow

up in Limerick County and continue to live in Limerick County. And have seen this site before, the refinery started, versus now, and see the growth of it.

ND

While we're on the topic of visitors to a space, the second character who speaks about the... is it the seaplanes Museum? When this character is introduced, it's clear that we're engaging with this landscape from multiple perspectives. How do these four voices or characters exist in relation to one another, and do you see them coming from the same time and place, or do they exist across multiple timelines and environments?

NS

I hadn't thought about them as existing in different places. I was... because, as we were talking about the mini series more generally, and this idea of a chorus, I was also thinking about, I guess quite selfishly, turning the curatorial statement of our mini series from my own research interests.

But there's a part of thinking about the role of a choir, and on the one hand, that being an actual choir singing, and on the other hand, what are the mechanisms that enable a choir to work well together? And one of those things being about how we listen and sort of complete phrases with one another. And what I mean by that is I'm thinking about this set of four voices as being a choir in a way. It was quite deliberate that all the voices had different accents. And I think there was something about how these four voices would bring specific moments that were based on my experiences of being in Askeaton, outside of just being kind of my personal experience. In terms of the description of the refinery, that started off as a piece of text that I wrote last spring after my initial visit, because I was so shocked by how this waste appeared. The second piece of writing is coming from a short film that I recorded at the Seaplanes museum. And again, kind of trying to figure out the scale of this, of this thing. The third was thinking about, you know, how do we live in these places? And is based off of a memory. But then, yeah, trying to break it down to something a bit clearer.

And I should say, I want to credit a really amazing writer, Joe Rizzo Naudi, who's a visually impaired, blind writer who...he talks about writing audio descriptions, also has these very subjective experiences, in terms of, he

has this amazing series where he's written about the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum, but the audio description also includes him talking about the experience of his arm being held by the visitor assistant. And so there's something that's a much more embodied practice. And so the act of seeing and describing what you're seeing is also like how your body is moving in the space. So, yeah, I was thinking about how the voices could also help people who've never been there to feel like their body is in the space. And then the final audio description is a completely different thing, but maybe I'll leave that for later to describe.

RE

Yeah, I mean that the use of the words "you see this", "we go here", like it very much, puts you in the as an as a listener it puts you into the picture, for sure. And I think with that as well, you're also playing a lot with scale. So you mentioned the refinery, these big pillars, these big stacks, as they're called. But then in the... midway through the work, you mentioned this family, like this very local family, from what I can gather and how they're using the estuary as a personal resource.

So we hear about the mum washing her hair, the older boy swimming. So I want to ask about the unease that this brings, well, that this brought to me, actually, because and probably to everybody that listens to it. I mean, we already know from the start of the work that the water in the estuary is toxic from the byproducts of the refinery. I think in the first verse, Monya says, "No fish live in the water". Like there's no life in this water. And like the people in the white clothes at the end, we don't hear the family's perspective, we only observe their actions. We're kind of onlookers. We're not exactly unreliable narrators, but we know something that they don't, or maybe they do know it. So I was kind of wondering how the family operates in this work for you in the work?

NS

Well, part of it was, again, going back to those who live in the those who live in the town, you know, what's their experience of living amongst toxicity and pollution on a day to day basis? Maybe for Irish listeners, this is a little bit more obvious, but by and large, like a woman washing her hair in a river in that way would often indicate that she's a member of the traveler

community in Ireland, also, Askeaton has quite a large traveler community, there's a holding site that's kind of at the edge of the town. And so I think, you know, it wasn't specifically about that, but more so, you know, how do we all occupy and live in the space? How do we all find ways to use the resources? Like, how should these resources be used?

And I think earlier parts in the audio description, I'm trying to place you in summer, you know, and in summer, like, you want to go to a river, you want to cool down. So this, this river is the river Deel, or it's based on, it's describing the river Deel, which is one of the tributaries of the Shannon. While I was there, I learned from different workers because there's a factory a lot farther up the river Deel as well, which also contributes to the pollution in the water that they used to fish salmon and their lunch breaks.

RE

Whoa.

NS

You know any freshly caught sound like they bring it home for dinner, and such a sense of how life revolves around a waterway, and like this feeling of, like being like a water or a river people, it also felt important to show the contrast of, kind of the massive industrial scale with just living in a place. I think a lot of work that, for me, thinks about eco-anxiety and environmental degradation, there's kind of, you talked about scale before Rebecca, but it's like, I think there's something about the scale in terms of the global to the local, which is also why I find Askeaton quite interesting, because it's a 600 person town, and it's very local. You know, you go to the pub more than three times in the space of a few weeks and like, you know, everyone. But it also sits at the edge of this huge aluminum refinery.

Foynes is an international port, and so having that point where it's also, we're brought back into really just like local "How do you want to spend a Saturday afternoon" that felt important to ground it so it wasn't purely about "let's look at this big oppressive thing." And yes, there is unease. But when we're living in times of climate breakdown like there is, there is a general unease, you know, how do we still find moments of joy within it. If that doesn't sound too Disney.

RE

Well, I'm also thinking about... because I read something. I read an article about it being radioactive red mud, and I'm not sure it is whether I'm just reading a very, very bad article. But it just reminded me of this new book by Tom Bolton, where he travels to nuclear power stations in the UK, and he recalls people swimming in the lake nearby this nuclear power station that was warm, and people kind of didn't really understand why it was warm, but obviously it's because of the nuclear waste. So I think for me, that was the image I had in my head. But, you're right as well. Like, if, if there's no other option to wash your hair, like, what are you gonna do? You know it was,

NS

...or if that's what your mother did and her mother did, her mother did.

ND

So in the last sort of verse, the people at the end of the work gather together to sing at the gates of the refinery. What was your choice to shift these characters from being disembodied voices, like as we hear at the beginning of the work singing to embodied characters within the song. So you kind of turn them from these sort of floating voices to actually, you know, characters.

NS

I was thinking about speculative works that I really enjoy, and I enjoy when you can't tell where the fiction is. And there was something about in the final verse trying to invert that line of fact and fiction, which was funny then earlier, when we were talking about, like, "how much of it is factual", it's like, "oh, I don't like, oh, I don't kind of need to listen to the work first and then figure out, you know, what you know, is it a real place."

In terms of when places actually exist, and there's a real set of consequences, you know, it's important to speak very openly about.. I did not write this as a fiction, this is based on an observation, like observations that I had. With the final verse, what I wanted to do with the speculation was to think about, we've been kind of moving through this landscape throughout the entire piece, was to think about how that world becomes

something that you regain a sense of agency within. Even with working with songs and with choirs, a lot of that work within *Chanter*, which I should say, is also partially a collaborative research project I'm doing with Lucy McCabe, who's a PhD researcher and musician in Dublin, and the title chanter came from thinking of the French verb to sing, *chanter*. It also came from thinking about the roles of chanting as both a philosophical thing, like a root of a lot of western song and singing, and also a political chant at a protest. And how, particularly in the UK right now, our avenues to protest and to kind of voice disagreement with politics is being taken away. If you want to protest in the UK right now, it needs to be within specified zones. I think there's certain regulations that it can't cause a nuisance, which then why have a protest?

Of course, there's also, kind of the policing powers around if you do protest are much higher, you know, kind of the process of now going to a protest, you sort of almost have this checklist of things that you do in advance, you know, like have have a legal counsel number on your arm, know what to do if a policeman arrests you. Histories of singing and song as a different way to access that protest, particularly Greenham Common women's camps in the 1980s and the anti-nuclear movement, and they use singing both when they're doing direct action. So for example, they would chained themselves to the fence of this nuclear site. They would sing to pass the time. The song would be a way for them to, you know, occupy the hours and hours that they would be chained to the fence, basically, until the police would come to, like, take them off. They would sing to jeer at policemen, which most policemen, I think, were fine with... enjoyed, you know, like it's, it's a, it's a, you know, a toss up between the two of them.

And I think it also was a way to build camaraderie and community with one another. Part of the final act was thinking about all these histories of song and also folk that connect to protest, that connect to direct action. And in terms of the inversion of the speculation is to think about this song that we've been hearing throughout the entire piece, what happens if that is a direct action? What happens if the protest is the singing? You know that that is a peaceful action, but a very powerful one, in terms of it grows through the amount of bodies that participate.

RE

So would you then say that song, in general, its use of storytelling, law, repetition, rhythm is a tool? Can it be a tool?

NS

Yeah, I think so. I mean, in like, terms of contemporary politics, there's a lot that's very disembodied in terms of receiving a news feed through a screen, in terms of a powerlessness over, for example, we can just declare genocide, you know, genocide in Palestine, the UN has declared it over a week ago. You know, genocide in Congo and in Sudan, and they're very violent things, and they don't really... at least for me as someone listening to this type of news, like there's nowhere for it to sit within my body, like I kind of, I'm struggling to know, what can I do to support or to try and help with the dignity of these people as they're being violated, but also, how do I process that feeling?

And in terms of a choir and singing, you know, one of the few places where I feel sane amongst all of that violence, you know, would be like screaming "free, free" in a protest. And so thinking about how song can also give us access to that type of relief or release and regain a sense of, you know, energy or commitment, either to run a fundraiser, to go on a protest, to have a conversation with someone who maybe disagrees with you, or just to be able to move through the world. As we see increasing levels of populism and far right politics that seek to dehumanise those, anyone in essence, who's not, you know, kind of white middle class, and at least in the UK, has a British accent.

RE

Yeah, yeah. It almost feels as well like you're talking about this level of protection that the choir provides, or at least the people with the choir provide. I had a question about sort of spirals in the Fibonacci, but I think really, it's about protection, maybe.

NS

Yeah, for the performance in the summer, I made a fabric installation that worked like a spiral. It was several bits of white gauze, which is also why

the characters are dressed in white that were dip dyed red with this stone hematite, which is the Bloodstone, which is the same color as the terracotta red of the waist. And part of the reason why that was a spiral was so that the audience has a root in and out of an architectural space. But there's photos of it on my website and Instagram for people who are interested in the description. In the middle of the spiral is where the choir is. And so partially, I'm someone who's quite shy at singing, but I love to do it. And so having a kind of gauzy structure was a way, and in a spiral format, was a way for me to sing without being watched while I was singing, but to still feel like I could participate in the collective action,

ND

Just to... because I feel like we kind of rushed through talking about the power of a song, which is also what this kind of entire mini series is, what we're sort of focusing on is sort of the the power of a song, and whether it's in relation to political action but also, more broadly, just anything. How songs sort of stay and they and they kind of sometimes have a lifespan beyond a human life. They can create, like a legacy and a song can be like recycled and reused to fit new meanings. And of course, that can go, you know, one way or the other. It can be harnessed for propaganda or for good things. But the fact that songs are something that I feel like that's part of their power, and then in and can continue to tell stories through time and be sort of passed down like between generations.

Well, I think there's something really interesting in your collab... I'm going to say collaboration. I don't know whether. You would, you would call it a collaboration with Bernadette?

NS

Yeah.

ND

And also, what you're doing here with, sort of giving a platform to this, like new song. And it's sort of like what the work is doing is kind of creating lore around this song. You're kind of adding to what the song can do, and what will the lifespan of this song be? Because you're kind of catching it at a really early stage, and I think it's just sort of interesting with the four

different voices that you're using as well, like bringing different voices into this song. Will that song travel with those four actors, or what I mean, they might not, but, you know, like, where else could this song be used? There's sort of a speculative future.

NS

Yeah, because I met someone recently who they'd been at the... so there was an open day as part of the residency in the summer, there was an open day in Askeaton and I invited the Inbher Glen Community Choir to perform inside a templar tower that had this fabric spiral installation. And there's a group of people who joined for the open day, and they came into the templar tower and heard the choir singing the song about the estuary.

And I met one of the people who came to that open day more recently at the end of August, and they started singing the song back to me. And I thought that that was quite powerful in terms of, like, these roles of stories and narratives. I think even the other day, I was talking to you, Nina about, I've been listening to a lot of folk recently and trying to... I guess there's a huge history of it within Irish culture, and thinking about as a way for me to access kind of different ancestral types of knowledges. But also, just like enjoying, enjoying the music. And I was listening to Lankum that are an Irish band, Dublin band, which are part of an Irish folk revival movement that's happening at the moment. And a lot of the songs that they're singing, they sound really contemporary, because they've kind of stretched and got this, like, accordion and bass. Like, not, not what you immediately expect from folk, or maybe I just don't have enough knowledge in it.

But these are songs that have been performed by bands like The Dubliners, which is kind of like the biggest like folk, like Dubliners are huge. If you go to Dublin, you say, "Oh, I'm listening to The Dubliners", everyone will know who you're talking about, even across Ireland, even across Irish diaspora. Yeah, there's songs The Dubliners would have performed, you know, in the 80s and before. And there are songs that would have come from, like singing in pubs and having a session in the 50s, in the 20s, in the 1800s that are being reinterpreted. There's like an iterative thing within folk music, where it gets repeated again and again and again. I think we were talking about it in relation to thinking about things like Tiktok trends, where,

you know, the power of the trend on Tiktok is how much it gets picked up and reinterpreted. And I think that happens in folk songs as well. Like the power of the folk song is who picks it up, how does it get reinterpreted? How does the voice change it? How does the arrangement change it? How does the musician change it? It's like, "Oh, I saw this singer singing this song."

You know, I saw Christy Moore song being performed by a singer in South London in the spring. The song is called "no ordinary man", and it's about a factory worker being laid off because the owner, factory owner, has to sell the factory. And the power of that song was that it was sung the same week as labor decided to cut down on the personal disability allowance, and it was sung by a person who was in a wheelchair. And so this person singing about being no ordinary man, nothing special, nothing grand, in the context of that political moment like that's the power of the, you know... I don't know if people would necessarily describe Christy Moore's folk, but like it. It holds that, like translation in terms of these words enabling us to articulate, you know, what does the present feel like? That's the power of song, right? It kind of hits something that emotive, that doesn't always need to be described. Like, even, I think the first conversation we had about this work, we were trying to, I was trying to describe it, and I was like, "Yeah, I think I just feel this way", you know this, and the song does it.

ND

There's something, sorry, I'm kind of going off on a tangent, but, there's also something about in some of the recordings of in the song, like the voices kind of go, like, sometimes in and out of tune as well. And actually, I think just as you were talking, I was thinking about, there's something about, sometimes I can't believe I'm going to use this as a reference, but like, the vulnerability. And here. Hearing someone's voice go out of pitch, or someone not being like, pitch, pitch perfect, is actually quite powerful. And I'm, I can't believe I'm going to use this as a reference, but I feel like that's also like, as probably one of the more famous folk singers, Bob Dylan, is so successful as he's not like, he's not got a good voice, but, there's..

NS

Don't say that's my uncle!

ND

But there's a vulnerability in that voice, that is something that sometimes, I don't know, it makes it more raw. It makes it more real. They're like, "Okay, I'm hearing real people sing."

RE

Oh yeah. I think it's the familiarity we were talking about with the beat and the tune. It's a very a recognisable... it feels, you know, it's probably in C or D or a note that we all kind of can sing at. So it's this idea of it being familiar and having these sorts of glitches in people's voices. It's heartening, it's genuine, it's more genuine.

NS

But I think even as most people in that choir, myself included, you know, can't read music, can't read sheet music, so, yeah, it might be in C but I don't know. I was just told to sing at a certain pitch, and, I was led in that direction and that, you know, and I think there's a thing about, you know, the access to it, which is why I think about it in terms of kind of access to forms of of protests, and being able to use your voice, you know, there's obviously, you know, a counter narrative about being voiceless and so forth.

But I think having roots to things like folk songs that are sort of inherently not meant to be professional. You know, we're not meant to have perfect voices. We're not meant to sing it in the same rhythm and in the same beat. You know, there are, you know, highly trained synchronised choirs that have incredible melodies and harmonies, and are, you know, perfect pitch all the time. But for me, there's something much more interesting. And like, why does this group of people meet, you know, every Wednesday morning in the local library, you know? And why is one of the men in the choir, Eamon, you know, he picks a bouquet of flowers from his garden every week to, you know, gift to someone in the choir. You know, it's like, what brings these people together? What brings that desire together? Kind of, what are they? What are they? What are they searching for? You know?

And I know, and I know, for me, that's kind of means of, kind of gaining voice, autonomy and agency, and thinking about it in this kind of political

framework. But it also doesn't have to be that explicit. And I think that's why I really enjoy it as, like, a political idea. You know, it's like, you know, our bodies are political. You know, the accents we speak are political. The way we move through the world is political. But it also doesn't like it's so inherent to us that until we kind of start to break those things apart, we almost don't notice. I mean, obviously this is, of course, dependent on, like, which type of society that you're living in... but I think there's something about the role of song that, because it's not quite so directly averse as, let's say, attending a march and going on a protest, it has a more powerful tool of, kind of bringing people together under common aims, which is part of what left or liberal or like, let's say, a politics rooted in human dignity is, for me is missing right now, we're trying to get there, but not, not quite.

RE

okay. It's a great place to stop, right?

ND

Yeah, that's exactly what I was gonna say. Thank you so much, Niamh, for joining us. I mean, you'd be here anyways if we were speaking to someone else. Okay, but thank you so much for sharing your work and also kicking off this new mini series and introducing this mini series. We actually, we have our artists for this mini series confirmed, but we don't know what order they're going to be in, so we can't tell you who's going to be next...

RE

but it'll be good!

ND

but it'll be good.

NS

It's gonna be really exciting. I just want to give a big shout out to Bernadette Hayes again, just because Bernadette's amazing.

ND

Without her, this work would not be possible.

NS

Oh, and a huge thank you to Michelle Harrigan and Sean Lynch at Askeaton and contemporary arts and everyone behind the team for funding the residency and supporting the creation of this work.

ALL

See you next time.

Bye.