Introduction

Spectral Landscapes, Borders and Absences

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In The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology, Christopher Tilley writes:

Places belong to our bodies and our bodies belong to these places. We learn how to orientate and re-orientate ourselves in relation to them and form internalized representations of them (cognitive maps) which play a powerful role in how we perceive them, and which in turn become articulated through a somatic nexus. So what is in front of me, and behind me, above and below me, to the right and to the left, extends through my lived body.

These words, that speak of how bodies belong to spaces and vice versa, and indeed the ways in which human subjects learn how “to orientate and re-orientate ourselves in relation to them”, resonate with the experiences of both the characters within, and audiences of, Samuel Beckett’s literary and stage worlds. These are worlds in which human figures attempt to negotiate themselves, both physically and psychologically, in often unforgiving environments, and in which “it all” is circuitously retraced, both somatically and psychically (Beckett 2006, 400). This special issue of Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd’hui, entitled Spectral Landscapes, Borders and Absences/ Paysages spectraux, frontières et absences, seeks to tease out some of the myriad ways in which embod-
ied experiences and self-perceptions are inextricably linked to the landscapes within which human subjects are rooted and reside. In doing so, this volume posits that Beckett’s works offer a vital space through which to interrogate these complex connections and the socio-political questions to which they give rise.

The genesis of this volume can be traced back to November 2019, when we found ourselves travelling from our homes in London to the University of Reading for its annual Beckett conference. It was during this journey that the seed of an idea began to take shape; we spoke of how, at a time of great socio-political transition, we believed there was, and is, an urgent need to engage in discussions that address the role of writers and artists in times of crisis. We reflected on the necessity of artistic intervention in debates that illuminate the ways our identity is linked with landscape, and on the need to ask how political transition and change can challenge commonly-held ideas about nation. We thought of hosting our own conference, an event that might give space to articulate ideas of absence, identity, trauma and haunted landscapes, and how these concepts might intersect in the work of Samuel Beckett and other artists who have either been influenced by his work or have some kinship with it. It was this conversation that eventually led to us organising the conference “Spectral Landscapes: Absence, Trauma and Nationhood” at the University of Reading two years later, in a world transformed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The conference and the essays featuring here came together after Covid restrictions were lifted in the UK, and the pandemic is one of the spectres that haunts this volume—along with, for us as UK-based editors, the impact of Brexit on the UK. Personal experiences of the pandemic in the UK, of course, have varied widely, and have brought to the fore shared circumstances specific to the UK’s political situation and socio-economic makeup—as has been the case, with different outcomes, in any other country. For anyone studying, conducting research or working in universities during the successive stages of the pandemic, much of day-to-day life was dematerialised. Digital forms of contact mediated by screens often seemed quintessentially Beckettian and spectral—we watched figures hovering in and out of connection, disembodied heads and faces, with our own images staring back at us like ghosts of ourselves. In grappling with the complexity of spectrality, borders and absences, the articles in this special issue suggest something hopeful: interrogating spectrality in Samuel Beckett’s oeuvre reminds us of how boundaries and borders that seemingly separate bodies from their environment, and the individual from the collective, are never as immutable as they seem, and are constantly shifting.

The intention of this special issue is to explore how Beckett’s work might be brought into dialogue with spectrality, borders and absences. Central to this collection is an attempt to question how the material and immaterial spaces of
Beckett’s work impact upon, influence and shape the bodies that occupy, pass through and depend upon them, and to locate the spectral traces and haunting legacies of these interconnections. In different ways, the articles ask how Beckett’s characters and landscapes speak to different versions of the past and of the present, in the UK, Ireland and beyond, and how his texts might resonate when reconsidered in the light of such renewed contextualizations. The volume maps a dynamic dialogue between the scholars and artists featured here and the work of a writer whose own creative output unfolded in landscapes marked by the aftermath of political conflict, turbulence and war. On another level, the connections made across the volume reaffirm why Beckett’s work is uniquely placed to act as a conduit for discussions around how spaces, landscapes, soundscapes and the situatedness of bodies intersect with questions of race, gender, class and national identity. As the volume unfolds, intersections of gender, historical and personal trauma, sonic presences, liminality, embodiment, nationhood, electricity, screams, archive, stones, memory, affect and the visual reveal themselves in expansive luminosity, shedding light on different ways of viewing, reading and experiencing Beckett’s works.

As Emilie Morin argues in the opening piece, “Beckett’s Spectral Presences”, spectrality should not be misunderstood or limited as a term that simply refers to ghosts and the ghostly. She explores how situating the spectral as “a social, historical and political phenomenon and metaphor can encourage new enquiries into Beckett’s influences and ties to literary traditions preoccupied with ghosts and revenants, into the work’s historical and political fabric, and into immensely important questions thrown into relief by spectrality as pertaining to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class”. Indeed, questions around the ongoing political dynamic between spaces, identities and bodies can circle back to the notion of the spectre as that which is imbued with return—past but unprocessed—and helps to consider how the landscapes portrayed in Beckett’s work, both spatial and intangible, are often haunted by absence and melancholy, evocative of a fragmented human subject. Beckett’s landscapes are frequently depicted as hostile and barren, with characters who are attuned to the brutality of their surroundings and make keen but measured observations of them: Winnie comments in Happy Days that, given her predicament, it is a “blessing nothing grows”; this is spoken from her mound of “scorched earth” in the “wilderness” (2006, 138, 152). Similarly, in Endgame, Hamm proclaims from his shelter that “outside of here it’s death” and that “Nature has forgotten us” (2006, 96–97). These are landscapes seemingly incapable of sustaining life, hope or progress, but which nonetheless sustain characters like Winnie or Hamm despite their struggle to thrive, their entrapment and their failure to escape cyclical patterns of existence. In its own idiosyncratic ways, Beck-
Beckett’s writing raises the question of how traumatically fracturing experiences are marked in the body of the human subject. And, conversely, how do the actions of individuals and collectives impact upon and mark the landscape, beyond visible and material damage such as that caused by climate destruction? These questions, alongside ecofeminist Theresa J. May’s endeavour to examine how we might “address injustices felt in the body—the body of experience, of community, of land” (101), became a nexus of our interest and enquiry, and frame the concerns articulated in this introduction.

If we consider that identity is so closely tied to the places that we call home, often irrespective of birthplace, then we can understand the urgency to narrate and navigate the isolation or alienation that takes hold when these spaces are under threat. These questions acquired real urgency for many people during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the UK specifically, one of the many effects of the government’s handling of the pandemic was to expose the ways in which Conservative policies have failed to support the most vulnerable in our society; the elderly, children, the disabled, people of colour and those on the lowest incomes (who are often the most essential workers) were placed in precarious situations financially and physically. In effect, the combination of political disintegration and global pandemic created a toxic mix of circumstances that were, and continue to be, socially destructive. Beckett’s stage works speak powerfully to the acute alienation of the vulnerable, in a manner that is sufficiently non-specific to gain new resonances in recent and current contexts. New light is thrown onto the lonely isolation of Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell in _Endgame_ when considered through the prism of social isolation during the pandemic. This was, particularly for the elderly living in nursing homes, an evocation prefigured in the aesthetics of Richard Jones’s 2020 production at the Old Vic Theatre in London. So too the haunting later stage works such as _Rockaby_ capture the longing, as V articulates it, for “another like herself”, “another living soul”, whilst the disembodied voice of _Footfalls_ speaks of the unremitting existence of having not “been out since girlhood” (2006, 401, 435, 436). When read in parallel with social distancing, these depictions create a space to work through and understand the impact of the collective, even if short-term, imprisonment within the home that came with Covid lockdowns.

In the UK also, the disorientating effects of the pandemic, compounded with the ongoing Brexit saga, have brought many aspects of the current political situation close to _Waiting for Godot_’s dissolution and absurdism; many cultural commentators have made this analogy. The campaign to leave the EU was imbued with nostalgic ideas of a past, and glorious, British national identity, free from the compromises and regulations of the EU as a collective. These ghosts of imperialism could neither rest nor, it seems, be processed in ways
that would move towards greater social unity, and were instead mobilized in
the name of continued isolation, fissure and social and political separatism. As
Fintan O’Toole observes in his book, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of
Power*, this phenomenon operates upon appropriation and reiteration:

> If England’s deep problems were that it had lost an empire but not gained
> a role, and that it had won a great war but not gained the fruits of victory, a
> kind of solution became possible: that the country should change places
> [...]. Perhaps empires don’t quite end when you think they do. Perhaps
> they have a final moment of zombie existence. This may be the last stage
> of imperialism—having appropriated everything else from its colonies,
> the dead empire appropriates the pain of those it has oppressed.

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This “zombie existence” evokes the haunting and spectral ripples of England’s
past and the deadening, yet desperately clung to, notion of its own victimhood
as the self-inflicting weapon. The many consequences of the Brexit referendum
have included the resurfacing of questions about the nature of borders more
broadly, both literal and metaphorical, and the often liminal spaces around and
between borderlines. The sea/land border that divided the UK from mainland
Europe, and the borders within the union itself, particularly the Northern Irish
border, came into sharp relief.

1 **Borders, Bodies and Nation**

A strong thread of discussion within this special issue involves the Irish land-
scape and its specific historical contexts and perspectives. In her article en-
titled “Performing Beckett at the Irish Border: Bodies, Lines and Haunted Land-
scapes”, Trish McTighe directly examines the Northern Irish border question
in relation to Brexit, positioning the border as spectral, and as that which is
haunted by the ghosts of troubled landscapes. Exploring how arts organisations
like Arts Over Borders have drawn the border into dialogue with art, in particu-
lar that of Irish writers like Beckett, McTighe positions their work as giving
voice to the border and its peoples, thereby facilitating deeper insights into its
psychological, cultural and socio-political implications.

The ambiguities of the borderline that separates past from present are also
mapped out in Alicia Nudler’s reading of *Krapp’s Last Tape* in post-dictatorship
Argentina and within the theoretical discourse of archive and memory studies
as it intersects with performance history. Nudler’s reading of *Krapp’s Last Tape*
demonstrates the socio-political importance and significance of his dramatic oeuvre in the Argentinian and Latin American theatre worlds. In particular, her article speaks of the archive as a resource for orientating oneself in relation to an oppressive and traumatic past. She explores how, in the face of the systemic ‘disappearances’ and torture of many thousands of Argentinians during the dictatorship of 1976–1983, Beckett’s theatre has come to occupy a significant cultural position by providing a theatrical space through which to examine this history and navigate the challenges of collective reparation.

The vanishing of people through kidnapping and ‘disappearances’ in the Argentinian context has indirect resonances with the ‘disappeared’ of Northern Ireland during its conflict, The Troubles. These are crimes that resulted in an unresolved loss and absence for those left behind, an unremitting quest for answers and the continual search for the lost loved ones. Whilst not exploring these themes directly, Olan Andrew Stephens’s/Olan Monk’s creative reflection on their film piece examining the Irish word *uaigneas*—a word for which there is no neat English translation but which conveys a sense of ‘withoutness’ or ‘away-from-ness’—resonates with other experiences of alienation; the film itself offers an evocative visual ode to the Irish landscape of Connemara and the migratory history of Irish peoples. Stephens’s meditation on the connection with one’s homeland even when far from home resonates with Beckett’s own uneasy relationship with the literary and theatrical landscapes in his work that recall the Irish landscapes of his childhood, to which he continually returned in his writing despite emigrating to France. These connections speak to the way the visual imagery of one’s formative years can be emblazoned on the imagination and reside in the body, perhaps as a subconscious way of orientating oneself in the world, long after dislocation or relocation from the places once understood as home.

2 Trauma, Bodies and the Irish Context

The exploration of the Irish bogland in Stephens’s piece is in dialogue with the intersections of places, bodies and art explored in Dúnlaith Bird’s socio-political reading of the creation of the modern Irish State through the lens of the Shannon Scheme and the rural electrification of Ireland. Her article entitled “‘You know what she died of, Mother Pegg? Of darkness ...’: Seán Keating, the Shannon Scheme, and Samuel Beckett” asks how these projects were influential in the works of Irish artists such as Seán Keating and Samuel Beckett. The interplay and shifting dynamic between light and darkness, both in terms of the advent of electricity in Ireland and in the landscapes of these artistic
works, operate on the socio-political level as a mode of social classification, separating those benefiting from light and those left in darkness. Bird addresses both spaces and bodies subject to marginalization, looking at the ways in which human experiences of isolation and decline were mirrored in the landscapes of the rural areas bypassed by the electrification scheme, she argues that this filters into the derelict spaces of Beckett’s *Endgame* and the vitality, or lack thereof, of the characters that occupy them.

Chloé Duane’s article “Site as Archive in Company sj’s *The Women Speak*” identifies the relationships between spaces and bodies in Company sj’s *Beckett in the City* series, and discusses place and site as archives that become alive through performance. In particular, Duane’s analysis of *The Women Speak*, which was staged site-specifically in historical buildings of Dublin, explores the social histories of these spaces to illuminate the treatment of women by the Catholic Church and the Irish state. Duane argues that material traces of the past are centralized in these works to reflect upon the experience of the marginalized and dispossessed. The connections drawn between past and present, bodies and spaces, silence and darkness in the articles by Duane and Bird speak to and resonate with Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands’s work; in *Material Feminisms*, Mortimer-Sandilands describes the capacity for bodies and landscapes to remember and forget events from the past and for bodies (human and land) to be marked and unmarked over time. The resultant effect is that “the landscape, in other words, is a site for forgetting as well as remembering [...]. [O]ne must also speak of the particular power relations—race, gender, class—in which bodies and landscapes remember and forget [...]. [T]he landscape continues to embody, support and create memory” (2008, 281–283). Within patriarchal socio-political frameworks, women suffer greater levels of disadvantage and subjugation in times of crisis. In combination with the systematic silencing of women’s voices and the policing of their bodies, identified by Duane within the Irish context, these socio-political crises and their far-reaching consequences further embed women’s social vulnerability, allowing for the escalation of an embodied symptomology of trauma. Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* offers helpful insights into the ways that trauma, especially that which occurs in the earliest years of infancy and childhood, finds a home in the body. He highlights the importance of understanding the socio-political and economic factors and gendered realities that intersect with traumatized embodiment. In light of these ideas, it is significant that the figures who occupy Beckett’s stage from *Happy Days* onwards, and particularly in later works such as *Not I* and *Footfalls*, are women, and that it is women who seem to be struggling to articulate an unnamed event or trauma, attempting in myriad ways to
communicate this through bodies that are confined or trapped in spaces which do not offer domestic comfort, and which often reflect or negatively condition the psychological state of the characters they contain.

3 Absence, Spectrality and the Sonic

Deepening the volume’s engagement with gendered trauma, Hannah Simpson’s article “A Bodily Haunting: The Woman’s Wordless Scream on Samuel Beckett’s Stage”, explores the way in which the ‘wordless scream’ is an embodied medium through which the inexpressible might find articulation in performance, and asks if this sonic and bodily expulsion can function therapeutically for the subject. Simpson positions the haunting and spectral nature of the ‘wordless scream’ in Beckett’s stage work as evocative of an unprocessed trauma, and examines how the effects of such an event continue to exert a powerful influence over the body long after the moment of physical, emotional or psychological injury. Simpson posits that, as soon as the actor vocalizes the scream on stage, the spectral manifests itself corporeally, which in turn the spectator must attempt to process in a multiplicity of subjective ways. This bodily and sonic manifestation of the spectral offers a glimpse into wide-ranging ways of thinking through spectrality in Beckett’s landscapes and soundscapes. How might the use of sounds, pattern, rhythm and musicality in Beckett’s works for television and radio offer new lenses to view the concepts of haunting, echo, legacy and spectrality? Through the medium of television and visual recording, Celia Graham-Dixon’s article on spectral materiality in the 1990 television version of Beckett’s Footfalls asks how the spectral manifests in, and through, the aesthetic of a degraded VHS recording transferred to DVD. The presentation of the central character, May, as a ghostly figure is echoed in the way that the recording itself has degraded. In a reading informed by affect theory, Graham-Dixon argues that the viewer can see the ghostly remnants of both the original production and the haunting content of the play itself, in the textural quality of the re-recorded object. Her article negotiates how the layered process of preservation and archive of performance, through recording and re-recording, renders the viewer as a participant and observer in the process of haunting and loss. Graham-Dixon observes that the spectral remnants that linger or arise from these points of convergence are just as significant as the ghostly presences that are deliberately conjured or activated at the moment of creation/collaborative production. As established earlier, Morin attests to the possibilities for thinking through spectrality in Beckett’s work, emphasising the fact that Beckett refuses to actualize the figure of the ghost on stage, even avoiding direct
references to ghosts at all, but rather uses specific stage directions to evoke ambiguity and focuses on “eluding possible directionality”. These are examples of the ways in which the articles in this volume approach the spectral as located within specific socio-political contexts, and demonstrate the vitality of these conjunctions, whilst warning of the danger of avoiding neat analogies. Chiming with these observations, Graham-Dixon’s article explores what ghosts may emerge from the processes of recording, and meditates on how spectrality resists complete and accurate descriptions. Both these articles consider how, paradoxically, material objects, landscape and spaces might capture spectrality or function as ‘signs’ of presence, negotiating these tensions and contradictions. This therefore draws us back to how the human bodies that inhabit specific spaces become marked by, and are markers of, the tangible and intangible traces of the past.

The legible and illegible marks inscribed upon bodies and lands shaped by inherited concepts of identity, nationhood and lived experience, and the deep-rooted questions that these marks foreground, were addressed in Sarah Jane Scaife’s 2021 Irish-language production of Happy Days, Laethantha Sona, performed on the island of Inis Oírr. Here, Scaife’s creative reflection on the evolution of Company sj’s production explores the processes behind the translation and the performance from a deeply personal perspective. She recalls the extent of her family’s historical enmeshment in the landscape of Inis Oírr and how this intimate knowledge of the people and the island is bound to her own Irishness. Nationhood and identity were integral to staging Beckett’s work in translation on the smallest of the Aran Islands, where Irish is still the dominant language. Scaife asserts that language and landscape are so inextricably linked that a collaborative process of translation was essential in enabling the landscape of the island and its people to work together to produce a fresh interpretation of the play, one that does not merely implant Beckett’s work into the environment. This approach meant that theatrical performance was just one aspect of the experience: the project consisted of a series of partnerships that enabled the audience and visitors to see the interconnections between the play’s themes and life on the island. This aim was captured explicitly in the verbatim accounts from local women included in an installation that accompanied the performance. Their accounts expressed simultaneous feelings of isolation and belonging, and gave voice to the often lonely nature of island existence; Winnie’s words were positioned as counterparts to those of the island’s women.
The Future: Orientating and Re-Orientating

Our own personal and shared experiences of *Laethanta Sona* shaped our apprehension of the thematic threads addressed in this volume. In the summer of 2021, we emerged from months of lockdown to take our first trip out of the UK since the Covid-19 pandemic began; in just under twenty-four hours, we would cross the landscapes of the UK and Ireland, by train, plane, coach, on foot and by boat to finally arrive in Inis Oírr. The journey from our London metropolis to a small Irish island allowed us to take part in the landscape rather than simply acknowledging its existence. Movement across different modes of transport allowed us to absorb and physically commune with the terrain; to feel the cold salt water of the Atlantic and to be subject to the boundaries and borders across nations and territories, criss-crossing tangible and intangible markers. This journey recalled and rehearsed real and imagined journeys of the past and of the future, requiring orientation and re-orientation to new climes and environments. Indeed, the spirit of such journeys interweaves with the ideas and themes of this collection and is both represented, and lingers fleetingly, as evanescent presences on these pages. The leap of understanding necessary to appreciate the embodied experience of individuals or communities that are different to one's own requires a journey of sorts, as does the act of reading or viewing Beckett's work—an often winding, cyclical and complex journey. The reflections communicated in this issue allow for a glimpse into the commitment of the scholarly and artistic community to think through and grapple with the effects, meanings, implications and consequences of crisis and the ways to situate Beckett's work within them. We hope that this volume speaks to how our histories, herstories and mythologies, both shared and intricately different, are bound together, and to how Beckett's work may serve as a linchpin to such connectivity. Journeys are always bound up with the ways in which bodies move and exist in the world—at once permeable and soft, absorbing and consuming their environment but also capable of resistance and reflection, destruction and creation. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty remarks in *The Primacy of Perception*, “[o]ur body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space” (5). The borders that we might imagine existing between self and surroundings are no more immutable than the physical borders society constructs across landscapes and nations. We retrace steps in order to understand how the mistakes, wrong turnings, lost objects, abandoned threads might be learnt from, reclaimed, understood and renewed, and to ensure that ghosts of old are allowed to rest, rather than haunt, reiterate and disrupt progress. This volume of articles attests to the usefulness of Beckett's work and the work of creative artistry more broadly in this endeavour, and seems even more vital at
a time when it often feels as though the forces of human imagination are under threat. In multiplicitous ways, the articles featured here offer visions of such a process—a grappling with the past to work through it and envision, and give life to, the future. In doing so, the articles in this special issue demonstrate that Beckett’s work provides a space to hold uncertainties, unknowns and ambivalences, and that within this capacious place there is room to negotiate essential questions of being, and acknowledge their fluidity and liminality.

Works Cited


