

## DREAMS, DEATH, AND THE IRISH QUESTION

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To know they dreamed and are dead...

Yeats, 'Easter, 1916'

Dreams are a universal form of human experience, and yet very few anthropologists take seriously the ways in which dreams disclose existential anxieties and questions about one's sense of self. Recently, however, there has been renewed interest in capturing the role of dreams in the lives of our participants amongst a handful of anthropologists (Groark 2017; Hollan 2004; Mageo 2012). Stewart (2012), in particular, draws our attention to how dreams are not simply about past traumas erupting from the unconscious, but, rather, suggest existential possibilities for the future. Yet, even amongst these accounts, little, if any, attention has been paid to the moments when ethnographers find themselves dreaming about their interlocutors. This essay is an imaginative provocation for ethnographers to take seriously the dreams of their interlocutors alongside their own dreams as important analytics for anthropology. Dreams, as Hollan notes, may tell us about the ways in which people currently organize their way of life and sense of self. Hollan calls these *selfscape dreams*:

*I use the term 'selfscape' to refer to emotionally and imaginally vivid dreams that appear to reflect back to the dreamer how his or her current organization of self relates various parts of itself to itself, its body, and other people and objects in the world. These are the dreams that, anywhere in the world, awaken people in the middle of the night or the emotional residues of which carry over into the waking life of the following days, weeks, or years. Such dreams, I argue, provide the mind with an updated map of the self's contours and affective resonances (2004: 172).*

Hollan, though influenced by Freud, draws our attention back to the manifest content of dreams, rather than the latent, hidden content. Recall that the traditional Freudian interpretation of dreams requires long-term commitment to free association in order to decipher the repressed realm of wishes and desires concealed and disguised from awareness. Differing from this approach, Hollan borrows from Heinz Kohut's (1977) notion of the 'self-state' dreams in which the surface or manifest content of the dream is understood as a way of encountering our current anxieties. This anthropological approach to the dreamwork forefronts the intersubjective processes currently shaping the experience and self-understanding of the dreamer. During and after my fieldwork, the dreams of my interlocutors, along with all the anxieties and ambivalences inherent to being with others, began to spill over into my own selfscape dreams.

In one of my most startling dreams during my fieldwork in east Belfast, an interlocutor dies while I speak with him over the phone. I wrote down the dream shortly after waking. Through writing, the dream became more narratively coherent than during the dreaming experience. In the liminal state between dreaming and waking, my body was wracked with strange sensations: buzzing static, dry ash on my tongue, a struggle for breath. I was frightened, and also felt guilt. This guilt remained in the margins of my awareness throughout the day and seemed to drain the vibrancy from the world. I wrote the dream as follows:

*We are speaking over the phone. Ollie tells me about a political act performed in his youth. He brandishes an Irish Tricolour at Protestant Orangemen marching in front of the chapel to infuriate them and then they begin shooting at each other. He begins to wheeze while telling me about this act and I feel irritated that he is still a smoker. Though I am talking to him over the phone, I simultaneously see him on the other end flickering in and out of sight, then his head droops and face obscures. His drooped head is made opaque by smoke and I can barely see his cropped black hair. The wheezing continues, and I worry. As he wheezes, I do not speak to him. My throat locks. I know he is dying. He wheezes very loudly for some time. Then nothing. I know he is dead. I do not react for some time. I feel that my mind is stuck, unmoving, and unable to engage in any other acts of consciousness than seeing the frozen image of dead Ollie. Then his brother suddenly appears in my thoughts in the form of a memory. His brother complains about how Ollie keeps a mourning portrait of their dead father on his nightstand, a photograph taken moments after the father's death in a hospital bed. I regain the ability to think and act and I try to call his brother to tell him to go to Ollie's flat to resuscitate him. Then I recall – again still in the dream – that Ollie's brother only uses burner phones and his laptop was confiscated by security forces so I cannot message him on Facebook. Then I hang up the phone.*

Opening my eyes, I am stuck between dream consciousness and waking life. I feel surging contractions of fright and guilt. My throat aches. Then as I wake a little more, memories from the previous day appear. I remember I spoke to Ollie in person, but these memories are entangled with the virtual dream conversation and distilled into the same event. I cannot tell which conversation is real, and awake now, I think that Ollie might be dead. Disoriented, I shame myself for having done nothing, for hanging up the phone. And it takes time, seemingly endless minutes, for sense to catch up to this situation, for the recognition from the margins of waking life that Ollie's death was in fact a dream, that the two conversations were different: the first a lived waking experience, the second a dream experience of a possible world.

The drama of my fieldwork dream weaves together many different images – what Freud calls the process of 'condensation' – into an imagistic performance. Some of the 'real' elements of this drama include Ollie's story of waving a tricolour flag before a gun battle, his smoking and wheezing, the way his head droops from a neck injury, the mourning portrait of his dead father, and his brother, an outspoken Irish Republican, whose house is often raided by police. This thick drama affectively resonates with me in the dream – I'm irritated at Ollie's smoking, then frozen with fright when he dies. This exposure to his death shakes me to the core in dreaming and waking life and presents questions about the role of the

ethnographer's psychic life in constituting his ethnographic subject. The dream also presented me with the question about the role my interlocutors take in contributing to my own subjectivity. Part and parcel of the ethnographic process, of course, leaves us vulnerable to the suffering of others, even to their social or actual death. And attached to this anxiety is the ambivalence and confusion of the ethnographic practice itself. Dreams spill over with an excess of meaning and mourning, and my dream may very well contain Ollie's own ambivalence towards his family, towards his actions as a Provisional Irish Republican Army (thenceforth IRA) volunteer, the effects of colonial and structural violence, and his own ambiguous sense of self. The primal ambivalence for the anthropologist, of course, concerns the question about whether our questions are hurting others, about whether we are merging with them in empathic ways or whether we are using them for our own benefit. Yet, the dream also is a way of grieving, an awareness of our common sensitivity and fragility in the face of loss, a melancholic intersubjectivity.

If Hollan is right that 'selfscape dreams' are ways in which our current anxieties find expression and organization, then the anxieties in my dream about Ollie also hinge around a constellation of encounters with him in which he shares his own dreams, desires, and fantasies. Additionally, Ollie talks incessantly about his own death. Over the course of our years of conversations, Ollie questions why he continues to exist and admits that in his dreams, he's often in a battle for his life.

While dreams partake in the image-making, ordering, and organizing of one's past and present experiences, they also stand in close proximity to chaos, to disfiguring the world. They can be harrowing, frightful experiences. Dreams may mutilate our sense of self and make us question the future – our own futures. They can make us feel guilt or remind us of the fragility of our relations with others by giving us a glimpse of the different future possibilities. I want to reawaken this prophetic aspect of dreams. My dream about Ollie, for example, speaks to aspects of the future – my anxiety that Ollie is going to die. Indeed, Ollie often speaks to me about the time he tried to kill himself in jail after being tortured, and he muses about what it might be like to never awake from his upcoming medical procedure. These are anxious moments between us. Ollie suffers from severe depression, though his chronic pain, he says, actually keeps his attention towards managing his body. Focusing his attention on alleviating the pain, he says, often serves as a distraction to his depression. He notes this paradox: he is depressed because his body is broken yet his broken body is precisely what distracts him from depressed, dark thoughts.

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In March 1886, the British Prime Minister William Gladstone and his cabinet formally announced their support for Home Rule for Ireland. In April 1886, a Home Rule Bill was placed before Parliament, where it was defeated. During this period, Gladstone also published a small tract titled *The Irish Question*. In this tract he makes the argument that it was unjust British rule in Ireland that gave rise to the question of Irish self-determination in the first place. He frames this questioning in terms of the dream: 'Only superlative iniquity led Ireland even for a moment to dream of separating' (42). For Gladstone, this existential questioning, which takes the shape of a dream of separation, is the inevitable result of the manner in which English rule 'in Ireland raised tyranny and sanguinary oppression, as well as the basest corruption, to their climax' (42). It is notable that the epigraph on the title page of Gladstone's book is the final verse of the 'Parable of the Growing Seed' (Mark 4: 26-29): 'When the fruit is brought forth, immediately he

putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come'. In the context of Gladstone's book on the Irish Question of self-determination and Home Rule, we can see this parable and in particular the harvest-to-come imagery evokes the sense of a future and final judgment, the moment when the seed's growth becomes fully ripe, and in the context of nationhood, the Irish nation. The sickle comes to separate the fruit from the tree out of which it was grown. For Gladstone, it is inevitable that if not now, then soon in the future, the final judgment rendered on Ireland would be one in which the dream of separation is realized.

The Irish Question emerges in the 19th century parliamentary discourse in Great Britain. It is a frame or a trope through which the indigenous Irish come to be understood as an object of concern. In discourses found in late 19<sup>th</sup> century parliamentary speeches, we see debates with how to properly transition Irish tenant farmers and peasants into more secure arrangements with absentee landholders and, perhaps, for allowing the Irish themselves to become landholders. After centuries of dispossession culminating in *An Gorta Mór*, or the Great Hunger, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Irish Question appears on the historical scene as entangled within the idiom of Enlightenment rights, of viewing Irish populations as capable of receiving the Rights of Man; a way of transitioning the belated Irish out of a feudal system into capable, property-desiring individuals, as people who can self-determine. These rights, as Karl Marx famously noted, inaugurate a split within a subject who, on the one hand, must struggle against others – 'separation of man from man' – to solve the immediate problems of existence while on the other hand must treat others morally (1978: 42). This political life, Marx notes, leads to the 'decomposition of man' into various antagonistic identities (35).

Marx, too, takes up the Irish Question. He declares, 'The Irish question is therefore not simply a nationality question but a question of land and existence. Ruin or revolution is the watchword; all the Irish are convinced that if anything is to happen at all it must happen quickly... [the Irish are the] preliminary condition for the proletarian revolution in England' (1972: 142). It was as if, for the first time, Marx had given orientation to his famous haunting image of the spectre of communism. It was as if the spectre could finally stop its wayward, pan-European wandering and find in Ireland an embodied incarnation in a specific location time and space.

Like many Irish Republicans in the working-class Catholic Short Strand district in east Belfast with whom I conducted ethnographic research, Ollie owns a copy of Marx and Engel's collected writings, *Ireland and the Irish Question*. The book sits between a hardback edition of *The DaVinci Code* and a VHS cassette tape labelled 'IRA Funerals' – staunchly fixed between conspiratorial fiction and melancholic reality. As Ollie speaks to me about Marx, he struggles to find a comfortable position, shifting around an array of pillows to prop his body. His head droops downward, and so he has to lean back, keeping one leg elevated on the couch and a steadying foot pressed against the floor so that his eyes can meet mine. He also has difficulty gripping objects. His fingers are often numb or unresponsive – his dishes have chips and cracks in them from being dropped. He has long since stopped placing his dishes in the cupboards and permanently keeps them in the dishwasher racks, which he runs every night regardless of what is clean and what is dirty. A vertebrae in his neck is mangled from when, in his early 20s, British soldiers used his body as a battering ram, slamming his head against a moving Saracen tank after he resisted arrest. Ollie was an operator in the IRA out of his home district. He is 60 now and slated to have vertebral body replacement surgery in a few months for which the surgeon gives him a 50/50 chance of survival. Ollie explains his decision to have

surgery in the idiom of negative hope: he says he hopes to die on the operating table. When I ask him why he hopes to die, he tells me he's a failure at killing himself. As I mentioned before, Ollie often speaks about killing himself; but this tendency he qualifies as merely his 'dark Irish humour'. I come to understand that Ollie's current isolation – he lives alone with the curtains drawn and ventures out of his flat infrequently – and cynicism towards his own life are embedded and anchored in the after-effects of a decision to forgo a leadership position and quit the IRA, nearly 40 years ago. About the Irish Question, Ollie himself reflects:

*Does Ireland have the right to exist as an independent entity free from British rule? The notion of the Irish Question as it was seen in Britain was divorcing the men of resistance from the 'gentlemanly' way of democracy. I see it as the English Question; merely the illusion that the Irish are the problem. My question then is why will they not get the fuck out? How many more years before a force arises which will make them leave and make them never wish to come back even as tourists? When they will be wishing for the return of the IRA who are too soft by comparison to what they are creating?*

Ollie activates the ossified and historical Irish Question through a series of dynamic interrogatives about the future of Ireland, about the creation of a new spacetime, and a new force that will drive out factions loyal to the crown: Loyalists, Unionists, Orangemen, and the Northern Ireland State apparatus. The creation of a new subjectivity, or New Irish Person, emerges out of the Irish Question for Ollie. Ollie offers an image of the future. After the British are forced out, he imagines

*there will be no democracy for about 10 years and no state party either. The military will rule and will erase the historical lies. This requires re-education – Gaelicization and forced cooperativism to destroy the culture of 'self' over all. It worked in Israel, the kibbutz. Assuming that some self-righteous prick will insist on 'his right' he must prove why and how it is his right since it asserts separation from all.*

Ollie's image of the future coincides with the destruction of a form of the self that has rights and acts as an individual. His striking evocation of how asserting rights creates a 'separation from all' stands in stark juxtaposition to Gladstone, for whom the dream of separation seeded itself as the result of English misrule. Rather, for Ollie, the Irish were separated from themselves by England's emphasis on individual rights. The idea of separation is itself the problem, and what is needed is a withdrawal and a return to a holism, an 'all' – a communal, egalitarian Irish State which he frequently fantasizes about.

Indeed, not only is Ollie antagonistic towards democratic and individual rights, but he believes that the downfall of the IRA began with adopting the logic of individual rights. These, he believes, created divisions within the community. Ollie believes that the Irish psyche and the psyche of the IRA itself was infiltrated by British notions of individualism and selfhood which eroded what he calls 'the we', which is analogous to 'the all'. He complains that the IRA mimetically adopted techniques for beating down fellow Irishmen from the Brits, as they formed beating squads to control Catholic districts during conflict. He says this experience of

*being beaten stultifies the mind and breeds hate... the IRA beating squads roamed the district until the 90s and after the peace agreement they became community workers. The easiest way to sow dissent in the district is to take a kid and kneecap him with a pistol. You lose the whole family. We talked about this strategy in jail as we were losing the support of families. Some genius came up with the idea of smashing their knees with breeze blocks instead. What do I know? They ended up torturing me for months in jail. I can't talk about it. Anyway, when you get beat, your mind gets poisoned. As for the community, the we falls by the wayside. People become individuals.*

For Ollie, there is a constant tension between 'the self' and 'the we'. As I got to know Ollie, I found that his current sense of self traverses complex experiences, the content of which moves at times from visions of himself as a messianic self who could have brought about a United Ireland through a single tactical decision, and at other times his sense of self has the character of what he calls 'being-beaten' with a 'poisoned mind'. This personal sense of embodying the messianic, of course, may appear antithetical to his views on individualism, but Ollie often argues that during his time in the IRA he was merely the expression of a 'we', a vessel of an Irish future to come, a future that returns at last to 'the all' of Ireland's past.

Ollie's current self also reflects and refracts within a matrixial genealogy of 'being-beaten'. This genealogy of being-beaten moves from the colonist prescriptions of the British parliament that first solidified the Irish Question and through the premature revolutionary predictions of Marx; through the unsuccessful insurrection of the 1916 Easter Uprising in Dublin to the impasse of the IRA and other Republican paramilitaries throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to unify the island. The Irish Question emerges in the context of Ollie's lived experiences as a trope of ruin, of being-beaten. I consider the existential structure of being-beaten as constituting live experiences for Ollie, working on multiple temporal, psychic, and embodied levels. The conditions for Ollie's psychic life in particular constitutes a haunting continuum embedded in the failure of previous Irish uprisings, including the IRA campaigns in which he operated, and stretching into the personal experiences of being habitually beaten by his father, being beaten by Protestants, being beaten by the Brits, and being beaten by his IRA comrades when he resisted joining in their so-called beating squads. He is isolated from his former IRA comrades now, and unrepentantly disavows the 1998 peace agreement brokered in part by Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA.

Ollie thinks a spectre is haunting his dreams. In his dreams, Ollie is often attacked by evil presences. For example, he's had a series of dreams about an incubus-like figure who attempts to inhabit his body, and in less phantasmagorical dreams, he relives being beaten by British soldiers and agents. And yet, in these dreams, he wins out, defeats those presences who would do him harm. Clothes sopping with sweat, he wakes from these dreams exhausted but resolute from battling back against being beaten. When speaking with Ollie about his memories, dreams, and reveries, it becomes clear that his immediate experience is often anchored in the past hauntings of being-beaten, as if what was hammered into him by his social world was the after-effects of the Irish Question. Shot through these varieties of experience is a desire for agency and agentive action, the kind of power he gave up as a young IRA operator, and which is denied to him in the present. What makes his situation most unique is he did something rare in real life: he gave up power. This decision to give up power, a power which he believed could bring about a (re)united Ireland

was, in many ways, an empathic decision, but one which has become more poisonous to Ollie as he's grown older. He describes his current depressed state as 'purgatorial mode', and he sees a single act of compassion as creating the conditions for this mode of existence.

Ollie tells me about this decision made through compassion as we watch, and he excitedly critiques, a suddenly emerging coup on 15 July 2016 against Erdogan's government in Turkey on the BBC. He frames his decision in the context of a dream he had after being offered an IRA leadership role in the 1970s:

*I saw everything, every person that ever lived or would ever live and die. They just all crumbled. Like that was a very cathartic dream for me because it was about whether I decided to go for leadership. It's about choice, you know. I get to witness all of this, you know, wars that have occurred and nuclear explosions and fucking massive numbers of people in their misery dying.*

This dream gave him a prophetic vision of this future. He explains that it contributed to his decision to not to take a leadership post where he would have implemented his unique plan to launch a deadly full-frontal attack against Loyalist paramilitaries and Protestant civilians alike. He describes to me his strategy:

*In fact, it would probably be the ugliest conflict that Ireland has ever seen since 1916. But an incredible amount of, and probably innocent Protestants would have been killed too, we don't have room for prisoners, we don't have a system for this. We have to hit and move. So it's kill everybody and keep moving. And I wouldn't have been giving people a chance to get away. So you're talking about a massive slaughter. People in Ireland have never gotten over losing their lands, and they want them back, and they want these invaders kicked out. And was I prepared to initiate that kind of slaughter? No. I wasn't. But there would be very few people capable of bringing that about, and I was one of them. It was the start of compassion in me.*

This dream presented Ollie with a future image of himself, one that he could not bear. The first time I met Ollie he told me he wanted to write a science fiction novel set in a united Ireland sometime in the future. The idea for this novel came to him in a series of dreams. Ollie describes the novel as transitioning between dystopia and utopia after a destruction of the islands of Ireland and Great Britain after a fierce war. In his imagination, the Irish would have emerged victorious, and the surviving British inhabitants would have been pushed across the sea. I came to understand his unwritten science fiction novel as a sort of promissory note through which Ollie remakes his previous decision, and rewrites his self in the process, indexing the way the world would have been if he had been a leader within the IRA. In reality, however, Ollie decided against leadership, and in his current assessment, he thinks this was a grave error. What he had once seen as an act of compassion, he views as an individual decision that broke from the logic of the Irish 'we'. He is alone and separate, he believes, because he acted as an individual. He promises me he'll write his novel soon.

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A month before a UK-wide vote to leave the European Union, I am speaking with Ollie about the future. He tells me the Loyalists are arming themselves again and soon society will breakdown. He says he knows how to escape from the district. And anyway, he knows that if he's to be killed, he'll be able to cause enough damage to be worth it. He is prepared for what is coming: ruin or revolution, life or death; a total war deferred. Then we are interrupted by the creaking of the letterbox. Ollie becomes distracted by the mail slipped through it. He asks me to pick up the mail because 'it's doing his head in' knowing that it is just sitting on the entryway floor. There is a lot of mail today, and many fliers. I give him a bundle, and he looks at each piece. He reads some of the fliers, which concern the looming vote. Ollie sardonically reads some of the fliers and spits out his condemnation:

*'The most important vote in my life. Here are some reasons to leave: protect ourselves from the waste, overspending and misappropriation of funds in Brussels. Safeguard us from laws and regulations passed by Eurocrats who have never visited the UK. Become part of the family'. Wow! Leave EU. I don't know, maybe I should join this party.*

*'Time for a real fresh start, east Belfast matters. More jobs, lower prices. Your family is better off with your family in Europe'. Did you know you were in Europe? Yes, this is Europe.*

*'Thank you for voting Tory'. This is so fucked up.*

After reading each flier, he rips them in half. When he is finished, he takes a long drag on his fag. He turns to me and says, 'Go back to the question, where was I?'

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*Go back to the question, where was I?* Ollie goes back to the anthropologist's question and asks where was the I who speaks. In my dream, the question becomes a melancholic formation, where Ollie dies. Here, I am helpless and speechless before the threshold: Ollie's drooping head and obscured face afflicted on me, impressed on my senses. Despair befalls me, revealing the guilt and shame inherent in the act of ethnography, of writing down stories that are not ours, investing attachments in others for the sake of which such stories can be written.

Ollie's father, an ideal of Irish Republicanism who commanded great respect from the community, once gambled with the family's money and lost, a gratuitous risk that placed Ollie's family in a precarious situation. Ollie's image of his father was shaken when he realized later in life the impact of this loss: 'that caused me to change a little bit the view of my father. So reality could interrupt his little fucking fantasy world?' His separation from his father's ideal perhaps inaugurated his first separation, a foreshadowing of his 'start of compassion', when in his dream about the bloody effects of taking up IRA leadership, he decided against it, and in doing so adopted a new sense of self. Ollie, however, comes to experience ambivalence from breaking away, from separating, and wants to rewrite his inauguration as an 'I' who speaks against the 'we'. Now alone, with a broken neck and severe depression, Ollie lived towards a reunification, even if only through the genre of science fiction, through fantasies about the great merger of death.



*Go back to the question, where was I?* The question of existence is answered by existing, and the 'I' that questions emerges out of a rift, separation from, the dense matrices of ambivalent relations with others. The ethnographer's dreams, like all dreams, are shaped by encounters with those we question along the way. The experiential core of the ethnographic act is an exposure to vulnerability to others who impress themselves on us and seep into the very capillaries of our psychic life. To be sure, dreams may evoke a sense of our anxiety when questioning others for the sake of the anthropological endeavour. Dreams, however, are not an all or nothing affair. They may guide us to make empathic connections with others and show us ways of understanding that remain foreclosed to consciousness. They allow us seek answers to questions found beyond where life cannot go.

Ollie does not die in his dreams. He dies in *my dream*. As if through my dream, Ollie faces the counterfactual to his individuality, a fantasy wish to return to the 'we' through the lowly road of death. In his dreams, he wins out in his life or death battles. In my dream, he loses. In my dream, he dies while telling me a story about brandishing the Irish tricolour, and his father is here too, waiting on his literal deathbed, in the mourning portrait on Ollie's nightstand. Ollie, his father, his brother, and their world of Irish Republicanism stage a thanaturgical fantasy in my psychic life. Perhaps, then, the dream has little to do with my anxieties as an anthropologist, but everything to do with Ollie's desires foreclosed to him in his own dreams. Understood this way, Ollie dreamed through my dreams.

My final day in Belfast I stayed with Ollie late into the evening. We watched the film *The Bedford Incident*. The film ends when the crew of the *USS Bedford* melt away after being hit by a Soviet nuclear torpedo, the final haunting image of a mushroom cloud on Ollie's television, and like during so many evenings we have spent together, he tells me more of his dreams. After I left that night, Ollie went to sleep like he always does, next to a photograph of his dead father, an Irish Republican who taught him to question and to act against those who oppressed him, a man who has yet to figure explicitly in any of his dreams, but who gave him the 'grounds to think things that could be opposed to the way things are'.

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