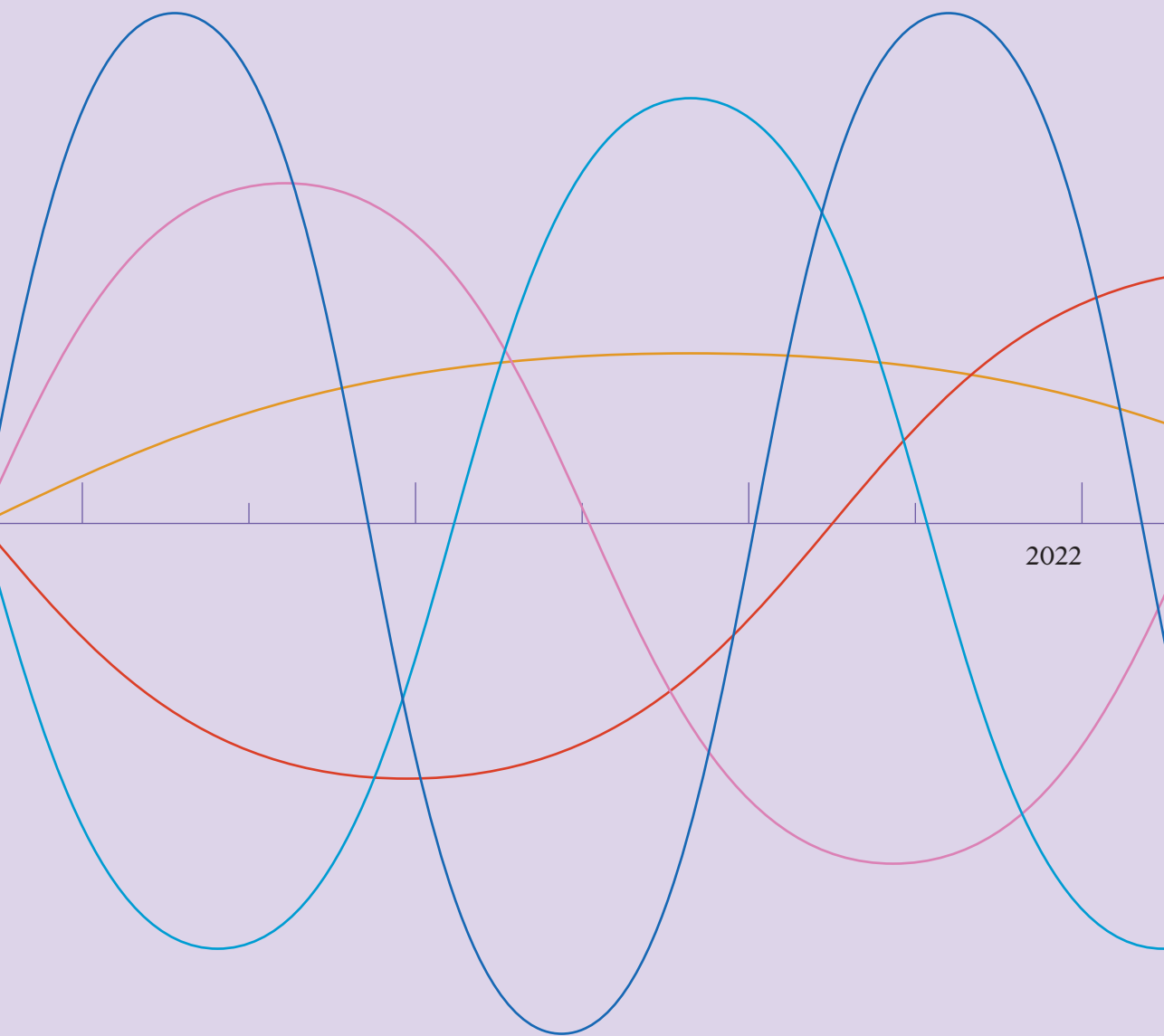
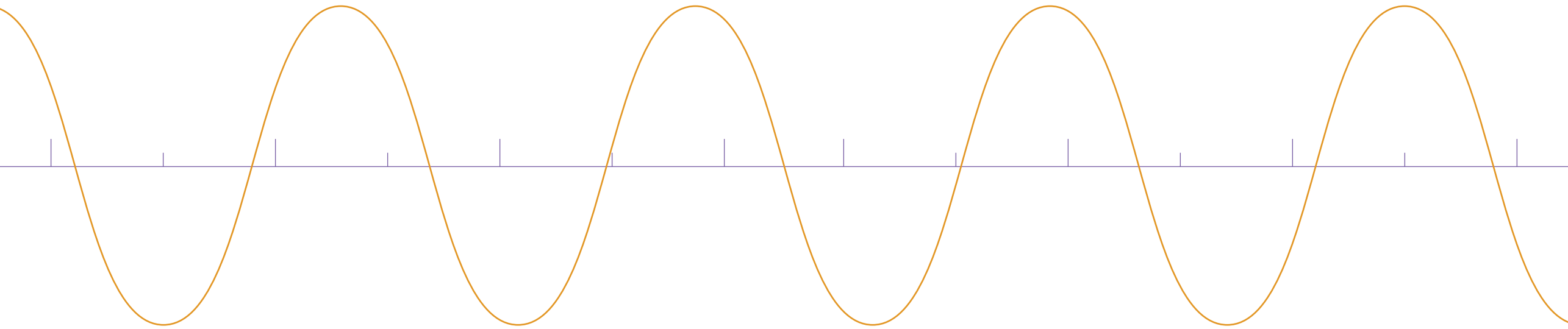


Critical Voices

Guthanna Criticiúla



Beulah Ezeugo & Joselle Ntumba



Reflections on a Diverse Ireland and The Role of the Arts in Celebrating Contemporary Irish Culture

The Éireann and I website opens with an image from 2001, donated by Pastor Larry Ovie. Pictured is a group of choir singers at Galway's first established African Church in the Eglinton Hotel Direct Provision Centre. The choir singers are all Black women, donned in matching cobalt and orange gowns and various trendy hairstyles; blonde box braids, side-swept wigs and bobs, leading an out-of-frame congregation in song. Each with a mic in hand, the passion is clear on their faces. The text overlaid introduces the archive, its goal and its functions:

An archive of black life for Black migrants in Ireland.

Éireann and I is a community archive that chronicles stories centred on heritage, activism, and art.

We are part of a growing movement of grassroots efforts from marginalized communities to collect and make accessible our own experiences outside of traditional archival institutions.

This archive functions as a space where we can make collective decisions about what is valuable for preservation, shape collective memory of our experiences, and control the means by which stories of our past and present are constructed.



First Established African Church in Eglinton Hotel, Direct Provision Centre 2001 | Credit: Larry Ovie

The archive is a creative project led by the two of us (Joselle Ntumba and Beulah Ezeugo). One of our many commonalities includes being migrants from Africa – Congo and Nigeria, respectively. We are members of the generation of young adults who entered Ireland during the early 2000s when migration, mostly by Nigerian and Romanian nationals, surged as a response to shifting global conditions. This new population make-up created two distinct groups; a multilocal, self-conscious social group, struggling to locate themselves between two cultural identities, and an indigenous group who, in response to this change, became preoccupied with reinforcing a dichotomy of us/them. This often meant people who didn't appear Irish were relegated to 'other' or alien. If a story is told enough, it can become a collective truth that is woven into public knowledge and then weaponised by dominant forces.

For example, urban legends of exploitative and welfare-reliant Black mothers directly correlate to a vote by 79 per cent of the Irish public for the government to usher in stricter border controls and revoke constitutional entitlement to citizenship under the Twenty-seventh Amendment of the Constitution Bill 2004. These narratives have a significant impact on our senses of self, and how we as migrants structure our identities. Herein lies the importance of memory work. When creating the archive, we were motivated specifically by the question, 'What do our experiences look like when they are collected, contextualised and curated by and for ourselves?'. In response to this question, we set out to create an archive that was as 'alive', inclusive and polyvocal as possible. The photographs and stories within the archive aim to represent the multiple experiences of the Black diaspora in Ireland.

Our first workshop, titled 'Remembrance/Resistance', took place in October 2020. We invited participants to reflect on how, and if, remembering together can function as an act of collective liberation. In the workshop participants were invited to draw on their own core memories centring on culture, migration and community. We explored how storytelling and record-keeping are necessary tools in creating counter-narratives that contest unpleasant portrayals of what it means to be a Black migrant. Through our collaboration on Alice Rekab's FAMILY LINES project in 2022, we led a workshop called 'Race, Place and Belonging' in the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin. For this workshop, participants were invited to bring an object from their families' archives and contextualise it using other participants' objects, highlighting both implicit cultural connections and shared experiences of movement and displacement. As artists who engage with specific communities, we are required to think carefully about how we host the people we invite into the spaces we create – and as newcomers to the art world, we are constantly reflecting on how we wish to be hosted by the groups and institutions we collaborate with. We find that our work, along with many others', has been swept upwards in the current of new diversity policies that aim to respond to the changing makeup of Ireland and the new demands from marginalised artists. This new welcome is enjoyable; minority artists and people who engage with art can finally see ourselves reflected and have our cultural contributions recognised.

However, the institutional focus on showcasing diversity is not always a good thing, and often it is far removed from the goals of the individuals it ostensibly seeks to benefit.

It isn't unusual that we are granted collaborative opportunities but later find that the same collaborators do not meaningfully engage with our work, its guiding principles or the communities it aims to represent. It is quite easy to feel lumped into the category of 'new Black project', resourced and platformed only to satiate cultural demands post-Black Lives Matter. There is less change where it truly matters. The same people decide the pace of change; who is invited to the table, for how long, and how they are made to feel once they are there. When engaging with the communities we seek to represent, we are cautious of the value of each individual's contribution. This means resisting resting on the archive's ability to visually represent something vaguely progressive. Instead, we seek to fully acknowledge the personal significance of each object contributed, draw out its nuances, and in this process create a collaborative relationship that prioritises a meaningful lateral exchange. In other words, we aim to be both the host and the guest. This work only means something when institutions fully enter a meaningful exchange with both the art workers and the communities they have invited in. Without this, celebrations of diversity can feel tokenistic; it can feel like a request to assimilate, to refrain from challenging notions, in exchange for representation.

Although the arts sector has made improvements, there is still much more to be reformed so that we can fully reflect the diversity of contemporary Ireland. The archive aims to be a testament to our dedication to our families and the preservation of our culture. Rather than victims of dominant structures, we are world weavers, collectively mapping the worlds from which we came to reveal our goals and the path towards which we are headed.

