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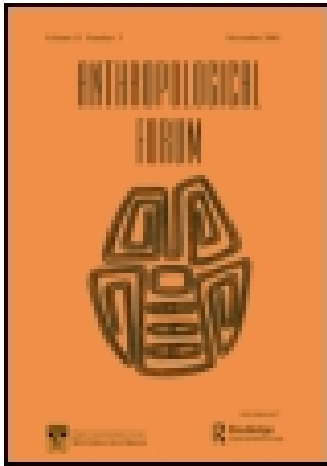
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### Irish/ness is all around us: language revivalism and the culture of ethnic identity in Northern Ireland, by Olaf Zenker

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## Book Review

***Irish/ness is all around us: language revivalism and the culture of ethnic identity in Northern Ireland***, by Olaf Zenker. Integration and Conflict series. Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2013, xvii+301pp., glossary, maps, figures, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-0-857-45193-8 (hardback).

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Zenker begins his ethnography of *Gaeilgeoirí* (Irish language learners and speakers) by leading the reader on 'A Walk of Life' on a Friday afternoon through a politicised and volatile Catholic West Belfast. Using significant cultural places he draws the reader into a linguistic, architectural, political, and cultural pilgrimage. The contradictions of class—religion, space–place, and conflict–tension invite the reader into a tense zone, a region of discord where Zenker situates his cultural and linguistic ethnography of what it means to be Irish. He later introduces the focus of his book: 'a reconstruction of the interplay between representations and practices in the interrelation of the Irish language and Irishness among Gaeilgeoirí in Catholic West Belfast' (35). The Prologue gives *Irish/ness* movement and life. It amalgamates pertinent religious and class data collected during fieldwork in 2003 and 2004 with(in) the social and cultural landscape in which they exist. This expanded temporal frame (2003/4–2013) and its place in a history of Irish/ness is involved

in coming to terms with changing and evolving (non-)simultaneous courses of individual and group identity formations. The Irish (language) versus Irish/ness (culture) distinction is explained well. The quirky title gives this distinction life.

Much of Part I (Chapters Three, Four, Five, and Six) can be summarised in a single quotation of one of the leading Gaeilgeoirí behind the Cultúrlann, a significant Irish cultural meeting place in West Belfast: 'Irish if possible, English if necessary . . . . Every English speaker is a potential Irish speaker.' 'Becoming a Gaeilgeoir' (Chapter Four) presents 10 starkly different ethnographic vignettes relating age, class, gender, family upbringing, and life experience to Irish language and culture. These trajectories are told by people who had to learn the Irish language as part of what was or was to become an integral constituent in the cultural (re-)identification of being Irish. It is this systematised and contextualised data which form the matter of Chapters Five and Six, and to an extent Nine and Ten: a diachronic reconstruction of the role of development of the local language scene in West Belfast (Dimension 2—the interplay between individuals and their structural contexts—presented within the frame of biographical time—Dimension 3) and the complex dynamics of representation and practice of the Irish language (Dimension 1).

'On Prophets, Godfathers, Rebels and Prostitutes' (Chapter Five) advances strong politically inspired claims that these four groups have been fundamental to increasing the personal, public, and political reputation of Irish/ness. 'Our own native language'

(Chapter Six) charts how the power, political, and cultural differentials associated with the tensions between Irish—prestandardisation Donegal-Gaeltacht Irish, what language purists call ‘broken Irish’, and the local Belfast Irish, which sits between the two and which when codeswitched with English, is called Anglo Irish—and English exist within these linguistic codes. Ethnic and political identity actually lead to a heightened sense of, and increased use of, language and the creation of Irish-speaking communities. This ‘prostitution’ is directed at the ‘broken Irish’ of what Irish-language purists dub a ‘degeneration’ of the language, for example, code switching, laxed appreciation of the Irish-only policy in schools. A few tantalising hints of the grammatical and lexical rules for Belfast Irish are given (127) and lead into a deeper analysis of the language-code purity versus code-communicative pragmaticism argument. Zenker develops his differentiations between ‘ethnicism’ and ‘nationalism’ through the lens of linguistic human rights (activism) and distinguishing between ‘us-hood’ and ‘we-hood’. The continuum is later managed by an ‘individual autochthony’ versus ‘collectivised autochthony’ schema.

Part II deals explicitly with the why of Irish/ness and outlines tangible connections between Irish and Irishness: ‘in order to *be* what you already *are* (i.e. Irish), you have to *become* what you yourself *are not* (i.e. an Irish speaker)’ (145). The format of Part II mirrors Part I with the same informants’ impressions of ‘becoming (aware of) who you are: Irish’ forming the ethnographic stuff for analysis. Zenker utilises these more identity- (and less linguistic-)based ethnographic treatises as compared to Part I’s language-oriented vignettes to help explain not only why certain people ‘actually bothered to learn Irish, but ... the general mechanisms at work in the overall social construction of ethnic identities’ (145). Sports, singing, music, and dancing are all noted as

fundamental elements in the ‘net’ of identity elements of Irishness *plus* language leading to a statement of ‘what it takes to be Irish’. The book’s main theoretical account of autochthony, a description of identity in terms of individual, territory, and group, is produced along with the claim that it is autochthony which is the causal and driving logic and force behind Irish identity as witnessed through the Irish language.

I appreciate the gusto with which Zenker set out to learn Irish. He claims this was integral and necessary to achieving the depth and context he wished to attain in his fieldwork. I believe him. He writes with zeal and passion about a topic he is not only interested in and obviously fascinated by, but has experienced himself: learning Irish culture through learning the language. This learning, and indeed the superordinate status of English in the diglossic situation he found himself, enriches the descriptions of marginality of identity and language so pertinent to any language revival situation. This account brings strength and influence to the writing, and makes the narration and experiences described more personal.

The rebellious and esoteric nature of Irish/ness is apparent in Zenker’s exposition, and the strong cultural, political, and linguistic engagement with Irish/ness as a reified construct in (Northern) Ireland cultural identity is obvious. Descriptions about the inmates learning prison Irish, *Jailtacht* (113), a linguistic pun on *Gaeltacht*, an Irish speaking area, are particularly pertinent. It would have been desirable to have learned more about how this marginalised variety differs lexically, grammatically, and in the use of expressions to which Zenker alludes. One can always quibble about what is not presented. I would have liked to have seen a greater contextualisation of Irish language and culture revival with more mainstream language revival literature; some linguistic analysis with examples of code switching and how these emphasise

representational/represented practices would have what the appetite of the (anthropological) linguist; some mention of non-Irish speakers who *are* Irish and how they perceive the language situation could have portrayed Irish/ness in a different light; more detail on orthography and reasons why the old Irish script was not utilised in the modern Irish writing reform, and also details of the language standardisation which took place in (Southern) Ireland in the 1950s could have made the linguistic account stronger. The unconventional architecture of the book, with historical matter and background literature appearing quite late, often leads to longish sections which could have been punchier. Still, these demonstrate the author's insight into the material and their

historical and cultural placement. These are all minor critiques and do not detract from the book's strengths.

This is a thoroughly well-written, thought-provoking, and fascinating work which should appeal to ethnographers and linguistic anthropologists as well as to scholars working on language revival movements, particularly those of marginalised, minority languages. Zenker does well to contribute to debates about the politics of language and identity and to notions of place, nationhood, personhood, and autochthony. On completion, I re-read the Prologue. The journey 'Entering Catholic West Belfast' made much more sense. I had a greater appreciation on second read. By this time, I felt like Irish/ness was, nay, had been 'all around me'.