

Revisiting and Reframing the Anthropological Archive: the Harvard-Irish Survey (1930-1936)

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Abstract: We consider a methodological opportunity when revisiting classical anthropological studies, namely the social anthropological archive of the Harvard-Irish Survey (1930-1936). A gift of the Irish field diaries of Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, together with the with familial and community effects of being written about in published accounts is our departure point. We explore the potential of collaborative research that is dialogical, aesthetic, community based and generates knowledge that fosters 'empathetic insight' (Kester 2004). Our approach is a form of 'reflexive revisiting' of the archive via field diaries and photographs from the 1930s, suggesting an alternative methodology for mutually engaging successor participants, artist and sociologist in transformatory acts in relation to community effects of anthropological research (Burawoy 2003).

Keywords: Arensberg, Kimball, archive, art, dialogical aesthetic, community, successors.

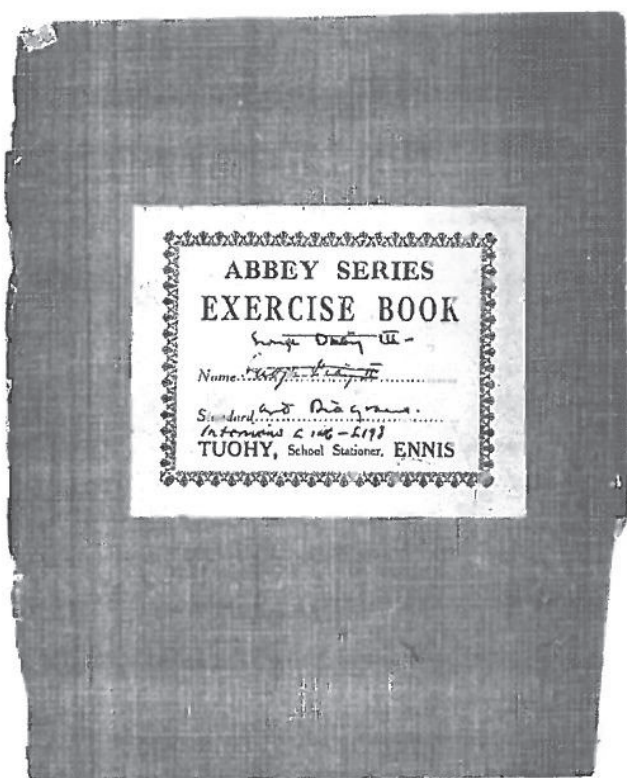


Fig 1: Arensberg's field diary, photograph courtesy of Anne Byrne.

Introduction

In the early 1930s, Ireland was the focus of an archaeological and anthropological study of a modern nation conducted by academics from Harvard

University. Known as the *Harvard-Irish Survey*, it had three strands: archaeology, physical anthropology and social anthropology. The site of the latter included Rinnamona in the heart of the Burren, adjacent to what was to become the Burren National Park in 1991. Survey publications, *The Irish Countryman* (1937) by Conrad Arensberg, and *Family and Community in Ireland* (1940) by Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, are considered 'classic' texts and remain influential within sociological and anthropological spheres (Byrne, Edmondson, Varley 2001). *Family and Community in Ireland* continues to be regarded as a baseline ethnographic study of the interconnectedness of farm and family life in rural Ireland in the 1930s, providing a snapshot of rural society in transition between traditional and modern culture. The classic accounts inspired not only generations of academics; for example, on reading *The Irish Countryman*, Dorothea Lange visited Clare producing a photo essay based on scenes from the text for *LIFE* magazine (Lange 1955).

The history and publications of the *Harvard-Irish Survey* have been debated in Irish anthropology and sociology (Gibbon 1973, Peace 1989, Wilson 1984, Wilson and Donnan 2006). It is claimed as the starting point for the professionalisation of Irish archaeology while subject to judgement by Irish sociologists critical of the functionalist theoretical framework employed, for substantive omissions and for lack of attention to the effects of institutional and ecclesiastical power and conflict in Irish society (Byrne *et al* 2001, French 2013). The force and tensions of these positionings and debates frame academic reengagement with the archives of the *Harvard-Irish Survey*. Zeitlyn (2012) considers that the archive, anthropological or governmental, is associated with the exercise of power while pointing to Foucault and Derrida's idea of its subversive potential to 'excavate and recover subjugated voices' (2012: 464) if 'read across or along the archival grain' (2012: 462). When considering the subjects (and their descendants) of anthropological fieldwork, how do we acknowledge concerns and make space for groups that 'historically have not been party to discussions' (2012: 474). What opportunities exist, what invitations are extended to subjects or successors to reengage with the anthropological archive?

This paper tells a story of academic and successor participant reengagement with the archives of the *Harvard-Irish Survey* by sociologist Anne Byrne, artist Deirdre O'Mahony and the descendants of some of the families whose lives are detailed in published and unpublished texts; Mary Moroney, John Ruane, Sean

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Roche and Frances Whelan. This latter grouping with Anne Byrne became the *Rinnamona Research Group* and with Deirdre O'Mahony, collectively represented another perspective on the families and community of Rinnamona as depicted in the anthropological accounts. A gift of the field diaries prompted Byrne to revisit Rinnamona in 2002. Byrne was aware that the social anthropological publications continued to be a source of unease and dispute in the locality, despite the passing of time, and was conscious of the risk and unknown consequences for local relations in returning to the locality with the field diary.

The outline of this story is familiar to those who practice ethnographic anthropology and sociology. The public narrative of returning anthropologists who choose to address those studied can be apologetic for causing unintended harm or valedictory pointing to the historical benefits of the study for future scholars (Burawoy 2003). A few reconsider what they have authored and use the opportunity to update and write another account (see Scheper-Hughes 2001). In this particular instance, the authors are long dead. However the concerns of the families of those written about endures across the generations. But where can this unease about personal privacy, the intrusiveness of research and the disruption of trust be expressed or listened for? This is a complicated history with partial tellings, ambivalences and unresolved elements; for some, the perceived poor representation of family members and the use of real names of people and places continues to grate while aware that this place and these events were of interest for a sustained academic study over a period of years. In the interests of community and family solidarity, the stories of the study were quietly and deliberately not recollected.

Conscious of the legacy of aesthetic representations of the landscape of the West (Scott 2005), O'Mahony's research has been directed towards a mode of aesthetic engagement that can represent the complexity of agencies, actors and agendas, consciously and unconsciously at play in the Burren. To this end she activated a social and cultural space as a frame for a durational public art project to allow room for an extended, collective discourse on the future of the region in the former post-office in Killinaboy, renamed, *X-PO* (O'Mahony 2012). The two strands of anthropological and artistic archival engagement converged when the *Rinnamona Research Group* decided to present their additions and amendments to the anthropological archive within the space of *X-PO*.

In this paper we describe our transdisciplinary, collaborative process in engaging with and extending the anthropological archive. In first and third person voices, we describe the paths that brought us together, the routes to articulating another story of family and community in Rinnamona, linking local representations to future discourses on the *Harvard-Irish Survey*.

The gift: Revisiting the Archive

Anne Byrne: As I prepared for the US flight to Ireland, Kelly Arensberg handed me a bundle of notebooks, paper browned and soft with age, a cover I faintly recognised 'Abbey Series Exercise Book' and the 'Luogh Diary 3 with Diagram, Interviews 146-198' handwritten in black ink (Figure 1). There are five diaries in all, recording the first hand observations of American anthropologists Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, who wrote about the familial ties and working lives of the rural people of Clare from 1930-1934. Arensberg's diaries of his time in west Clare, namely Luogh, record the preoccupations of people, their work on the land, rearing, selling and buying cattle, conventions of marriage and inheritance, the dominance of religion and politics in conversation, the scarcity of money and the significance of 'influence' for procuring work.

Immersed in reading Kimball's diary from Rinnamona, this partial record, I am brought back to another time and place. I can hear people speak, I know in which house the anthropologist stood and the individual or family about whom he writes. The attitudes, opinions, stories and reminiscences of the people of Rinnamona are recorded in pencil, transcribing verbatim speech, interspersed by the anthropologist's notes to himself, beginning interpretations of the life and culture which surrounded him. The Solon Kimball diary is 115 pages long, spanning December to January as the year turned from 1930 to 1931. Kimball is staying with Mr and Mrs Quinn; he is directed there by the schoolteacher Kelleher. Kimball is accompanied by Quinn on his daily visits to each of the 17 households in Rinnamona. Kimball writes about religious rituals, the authority of priests and teachers, tuberculosis and its communal effects, card-playing, music and dancing, power and resistance, land agents and land lords, memories of the famine, national and international politics. He writes that he is teased and asked if he would like some female company; he places himself within the account, a move which is in sympathy with the perspective of the anthropologist as living both inside and outside the community he observes and about



Fig. 2: Michael 'the judge' O'Donoghue, photograph courtesy of Mary Moroney



Fig. 3: Installing the archive, photograph Jay Koh, courtesy Anne Byrne 2008

whom he makes interpretations. The anthropologists collected and recorded all that they saw, heard, listened to and were told. The diaries, letters and unpublished archives of the *Harvard-Irish Survey* are testament to this (Byrne 2011, French 2013).

The paper records and archives of the *Harvard-Irish Survey* are located in repositories throughout the US; the receipt and return of these field notes, this partial archive, to the sites in which they were made needed careful consideration (Byrne 2014, forthcoming). Having received the diary and feeling its emotional burden, I contemplated my role and options to pass on this particular gift. Perhaps the gift of the diaries from Kelly Arensberg is symbolically reciprocal, referencing the assistance extended by local people to the American anthropologists during their time in Ireland? Perhaps it is an act of altruism, one that extends the sociality of the gift into the future? (Tolland 2012). The factors that motivate giving, receiving and reciprocating require deeper consideration than can be given here, but in the context of the persistent unease with the published work, I decided that the successor community be first introduced to the field diaries, *prior* to academic engagement with the material.

In a review of the 'divergent orbits' of ethnography in sociology and anthropology, Burawoy (2003) considers the types of 'revisits' that are possible when the ethnographer (or surrogate) returns to the site of a previous study. He distinguishes *replication* (concerned with constancy and reliability of findings over time) from the *focussed revisit* (an ethnographic study of people and place in the present, compared to an earlier study in the same place with predecessors), arguing for a more 'reflexive ethnography' that takes into account history, context and theory. The capacity to position and reposition oneself inside and outside the study is arguably gained through reflexive practice. Collaboration with others with diverse points of contact with the study may also enhance reflexivity. Burawoy (2003) concerned with the rituals of the anthropological revisit, castigates the sociological practitioner for neglecting this aspect of inquiry. His range of types of academic revisit include

'rolling, punctuated, heuristic, archaeological and valedictory' (2003: 668). The 'archaeological revisit' in which the history of relations between observers and participants is excavated through documents, publications and archives of the project is somewhat aligned to our present practice. The ethnographer tracks forward and backwards in time, linking past to present, making new interpretations. None of us are the original ethnographers or participants; all of us are 'successors' in one way or another as we collectively engage with the original archive, in the original site in which the study took place, to confront once again the anthropological narrative and the disparate responses to it. Revisiting 'from below', by participants or their successors is not considered by Burawoy. Our revisit engages with the published anthropological account via the field notes compiled by the anthropologist in the performance of his work and from the vantage of artist, sociologist and successor participants. We do not assume the mantle of anthropology and do not argue here with the anthropological narrative of how rural communities were formed and maintained or how and why individuals were recruited into their communal, economic and familial roles. Contesting the lack of opportunity for successors to speak back to the account, we redeploy the field notes to create such an opportunity, inviting subjects to read and work with the archive. This approach to archives is recognised by French (2013) as 'democratising', one that '...enlivens contemporary, local, public, and scholarly debates and concerns' (2013: 170).

Private lives

Any rereading of the Arensberg and Kimball diaries involves a form of revisiting, as is writing about the content or making decisions about where to archive the field diaries in the future. The publication of the third edition of *Family and Community in Ireland* (2001) involved cautious consultation with successor families; there was no wish to further disrupt private lives, yet I go back to the sites in which the original study took place, engaging in revisiting, despite myself. The



Fig. 4: Installation of photographs of the Rinnamona Dail and some of the RRG books, photograph courtesy Deirdre O'Mahony

publication was merited on the grounds that it provided a socio-historical context for telling the relatively unknown story of the three strands of the *Harvard-Irish Survey* in Ireland. Though the named persons, the predecessors, were long gone, the successors continued to carry unresolved aspects of the community story, of being made visible without consent. The 'community studies' approach pioneered by Arensberg and Kimball in Ireland involved close scrutiny of the perspectives, speech, actions and interactions of named individuals, theoretically assuming these as a reflection of position and power in the social structure of community. In documenting farm family structure and culture, the anthropologist observed people as they went about their daily business, aware but unaware of his presence in so far that this was possible. The field diaries record the observations of the anthropologists in their attempt to move closer to those who lived here. Investigating the private life is precisely their concern.

I return to Rinnamona with Kimball's diary, contacting those whom I knew from previous visits. All had read the publications and predecessors who were directly mentioned by name in *Family and Community in Ireland*.

Sean: That study was the first that ever came back, where the descendants were able to look for it I suppose...we saw the end result as well, that was different.

(Sean Roche, RRG Member, 25th August 2008).

In 2008 we read the diaries aloud, told stories and corrected the details in the diary, errors of naming, as winter turned to spring (see Byrne and O'Mahony 2012). I listened and sketched a map of family relationships in 1930s Rinnamona, visualising the movement of people as households reformed over time through birth, marriage, death and emigration. Though the catalyst for this recounting and tracing was ostensibly the temporary possession of the gift of the field note diary, we began to make another record from the reflections and interactions of the successors. We walked the village and its boundaries, reconstructing and imagining the seventeen households of the 1930s, remembering the family names of adults and children, photographing ruins, farm tools, rusting churns, delph. This revisit was a collaborative sharing of knowledge *in situ*. The field notes featured the perceptions of elders comparing their own work ethic with the easier lives of the young men and women in the village. These and other stories resonated among us, provoking present-past comparisons of family relationships, community connectedness and the exigencies of agricultural work. The photographic survey of buildings prompted more comparisons, reflecting on social and economic changes and the consequences for this place and these people. Reading Kimball's diary together, correcting and amending details, tracing relationship across



Fig. 5: RRG Installation of the Archive, photograph Ben Geoghegan Courtesy Deirdre O'Mahony/X-PO 2008

the generations, bringing stories of the past to bear, facilitated the repositioning of the successors *inside* rather than *outside* the history of the *Harvard-Irish Survey*. The successors became informed observers; their subject the anthropological account via the mediating entity of the field notes diary. The *Rinnamona Research Group* reoccupied the original field site, reading about the past, engaging with the archive slowly while considering the next step. A desire to invite others into the intertwining histories of observer and observed was expressed, a process that involved extending and visualising the archive and a move into the public space of the *X-PO*.

Sharing the Field: Archival Collaboration

Deirdre O'Mahony: As an artist, based in the Burren, my practice is both site and context-specific. In the 1990s my primary concern was the aesthetic of the landscape (O'Mahony 2006). That detached, estranged perspective was shattered by a decade-long environmental conflict in nearby Mullaghmore (O'Mahony 2012). In its wake there remained a reluctance to either discuss the controversy, or its effects on local relationships (O'Rourke 2005). Anxieties resurface when new policies and planning strategies are proposed in the region. To find a way of addressing the complexity of this landscape through my practice, I directed my research towards a process-based methodology that might actively and visibly negotiate the polarity between an aesthetic and a cultivator's perspective on landscape and engage with different publics in the area (Jackson 1974). My subsequent art practice focused on negotiating between both perspectives, activating public, discursive spaces where the social, cultural, environmental and economic future of the region might be discussed. Re-opening the former post-office in Killinaboy, two miles from Rinnamona and the site of the environmental conflict represents this practice.

Re-framed as an artwork and renamed *X-PO*, it became a locus for a re-examination and articulation of place-based knowledge and a reminder of the social function of the post office. The *X-PO* provides a physical and symbolic space in which to re-view local/global

relational connections through a mix of local archival installations, events and exhibitions. I was committed to an extended process of engagement not only as an artist and academic but also as a local resident, engaging publicly in a transdisciplinary enquiry into location and belonging. In order to activate the space I make use of the visual alongside the dialogical within my aesthetic language. Art historian and critical theorist Kester uses the term 'dialogical aesthetic' to define collaborative art practices that have a conscious, ethical dimension. He argues that a dialogical aesthetic process based on communication and intersubjective exchange can help us to 'speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict' (Kester 2004:8). However presuming that individuals have the capacity and desire to set aside deeply ingrained notions of difference is perhaps hopelessly optimistic, particularly in contested situations where there are manifest differentials in power relations. Recognising this problem, Kester proposes two further necessary steps in the process: connected knowing, which takes into account the social context from which others speak, judge and act, and empathetic insight. This can be produced upon a series of axes, in the rapport between artists and their collaborators, among the collaborators themselves, and between the collaborators and the community of viewers. This methodology was deployed in responding to the *Rinnamona Research Group's* invitation to join them in an archival exhibition-making process in the *X-PO*.

At *X-PO* the creation and installation of archives that reframed overlooked, obscured or forgotten aspects of local knowledge, history and events was the primary tool of engagement. The archive has been examined, contested, deployed and re-invented within contemporary art practice to interrogate the power of representational practices (O'Mahony 2006, 2012). The opening installation at *X-PO* used the abandoned contents of the building, the belongings of the former postmaster, John Martin, 'Mattie' Rynne. The broken radios, electronic manuals, books, papers, cassette tapes, files and notebooks were installed within the familiar space and set alongside a monumental portrait drawing of the postmaster made with soot. These material traces pointed to a man who lived his life on his own terms, reading, listening, learning, curious about communicating with the wider world. The partial, fragmentary archive did more than speak to one man's story; it was read and understood by visitors as 'a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory' that spoke to subjectivities around overlooked and often disregarded aspects of rural life (Foster 2004: 4). The Mattie Rynne archive and to an extent, *X-PO*, represented Pierre Nora's idea of *lieu de mémoire*; the defunct rural post office, as art, takes on a new function as a site 'where memory crystallises and secretes itself' (Nora 1989:7).

The opening exhibition in December 2007 draws audiences from both the immediate locality and wider cultural and academic spheres. This coincides with the initial stage of the *Rinnamona Research Group* archival project. Anne Byrne visits and we begin a conversation about the power of visualising an archive. The group asks if I will join them in making a public exhibition of their research.

Reframing the Archive

We begin a process of reflexive, situated enquiry in order to redress the calcifying effect and affect of the anthropological publications.

Growing up as a young lad we always heard the old people talking about this American guy who came. While he was here they didn't know he was writing the book but of course they all heard about the book afterwards when somebody sent it home from America. A lot of them weren't too pleased about what was written in the book either, maybe you know, he told it as it was and it doesn't always go down well. You know, some of the stories. It wasn't too bad, you know but sure like everything, people chatting around the fire, what they say – you're inside in a private house talking ... things will be said that weren't meant to be published but they were published of course. This guy was writing it all down and they didn't know that, they'd have been much warier I'm sure if they did.

(Francis Whelan RRG 2012)

We listen, carefully and actively to one another during the weeks prior to mounting the exhibition. A dialogical, intersubjective exchange process requires trust; we are not, in the words of one of the successors, to 'repeat the sins of the fathers'. Our shared project is to reframe the original anthropological account thinking through the archive and mounting an exhibition of materials in the locality. Through this 'archeological' process, digging, excavating and unearthing the untold histories of family and community lives in the 1930s, the group can disrupt and question the 'already-said' by placing another representation of Rinnamona within the public domain (Foucault 1969). Connected knowing and empathetic insight necessary to a dialogical aesthetic process, are activated as names are traced and relationships mapped. The successor group mobilizes friends and relations from Australia to New York in the hunt for photographs of farm and family life in the 1930s. Permissions are granted for their use and they are scanned and reprinted in the *X-PO*. We connect people and place, tangibly spatialising relationships. Images play a key part in this process:

We had heard all those different names that were in Rinnamona, we had no face to them, no image at all, so we got a lot of the photographs, collected a lot of different material from different people and then, they all told us different things. (Figure 2)

(Mary Moroney RRG 25th August 2008)

We think about how to process and reproduce this material and decisions are rejected and adopted. All bring different competencies to the table - place-based knowledge, artistic skills and academic knowledge of the texts and their wider relevance. For the anthropologists, relationships with subjects are shaped by disciplinary concerns and 'scientific' distance; this is not the case with us. We are aware that we are, to use artist Suzanne Lacy's term, 'idiosyncratic' outsiders as we reflexively try to articulate and extend what our combined knowledges can 'do' as we engage with the archive (Paget-Clarke, citing Lacy 2000).

All work long into the evenings prior to the exhibition, printing, mounting and framing photographs (Figure 3). We collate three books: local children's contributions to the *Schools Folklore Scheme* (1937-38), including school photographs dating back to the 1920s, a collection of family photographs of each of the 12 households named in *Family and Community in Ireland*, and a facsimile copy of Kimball's diary. A wall drawing of the townland map is painted in a faint wash of ink. Black frames order the photographs and the members of the 'Rynamona Dáil' are placed in relation to the spatial location of the houses in the original field site (Figure 4).

There are individuals for whom no photograph exists and so group photographs are scrutinised, faces are identified, cropped, enlarged and reprinted. Some images are blurred, scanned from Mass cards that are already indistinct and the possibility of making drawings that can stand as a more symbolic, layered representation is discussed. This is rejected; the primary concern is to stay with the reality of the family photographs, just as they are, taken in that moment in time, without another layer of representation or interpretation. Kimball's portrait and photographs he sent back after his return visit in 1968 are also included in the exhibition (Figure 5).

Foster points to the 'archival impulse' as a desire to make often displaced or lost historical information physically present through the use of material objects, images and texts and retrieved in a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory (Foster 2004: 4). The installation carries traces of all the actors - anthropologists, artist, sociologist and successors. Byrne's handwriting inscribes the names of families, correctly, on the images; O'Mahony's map provides the ground for their placement, and objects are excavated from houses and barns, labeled and carefully installed by the successors, acknowledging a place for tacit,

knowledge. The presence of those named is felt through the images and the materiality of the objects, including the anthropologist's pipe.

Voices are also present, an audio recording of a radio programme on the *Harvard-Irish Survey* in Clare whispers through headphones, (Owens 2006). A slideshow flickers with images of the houses as they are now. First edition copies of the published works of the *Survey* are assembled and exhibited. The archive provides a dense, multi-layered representation of Rinnamona in the 1930s, present again through the agency of Solon Kimball's diary and Kelly Arensberg's generosity. It is a counter-archive, 'a form of re-collection of that which has been buried' (Mereweather 2006), better suited to the business of finding the gaps between discursive practices and challenging the enunciative field of the texts (Foucault 1969). Through the actions of the successors, the disruptive potential comes into play; the smells, textures, sounds and speech haunt the anthropological texts.

Successors Meet Predecessors was the name of the exhibition. The *Rinnamona Research Group* mediate and explain the work to various 'publics', including academics. The objects serve as prompts for visitors, triggering memories into stories through skillful interviewing. Photographs of family members are found where none were thought to exist, and new names put to faces. Memories are evoked, reminders of the social and agricultural life when mutual co-operation, the *Meitheal*, was commonplace. This is a reflective and not a restorative nostalgia (Boym 2001). It is felt more keenly as the effects of boom-time excesses are playing out and emigration, once more, is felt in Rinnamona.

Towards Transformatory Archival Engagements

We began with the gift of the 1930s field diaries from the *Harvard-Irish Survey*. The published anthropological account, we argue, colonised familial and communal recollection of the *Survey* in Rinnamona. The archival gift, a tacit acknowledgement of the shared ownership of research data, enabled successors to read first hand observations made about predecessors, providing an opportunity to publicly think through anthropological representations of family and community and to extend the archive using communal resources. The process was cathartic as the descendants of those observed became the observers - examining, surveying visualising and re-presenting their own, new account. The research, exhibition-making process and subsequent mediation reflect the axes of empathetic enquiry. Kester argues that a dialogical aesthetic is potentially transformative; it can produce new forms of subjectivity out of social relations and dialogical interactions. The successors took up the invitation to add own voices to academic discourses on the texts, engaging with the archive and transforming own relations to it.

Some of them [were] not correct either, he had bachelors when they were married men, they

weren't identified correctly and we have corrected that now in the space, which was important to us as a group.

(Mary Moroney, RRG June 14 2008)

The archival installation provided a more nuanced understanding of the enduring power relations set in motion, consciously and unconsciously through the texts. Meeting, making and mediating the exhibition allowed an exchange of knowledge across and beyond individual disciplines and positions. This was made possible by a durational commitment to a process more associated with ethnographic practice. Durational sitedness is now an important marker of critical visibility and a central part of a creative praxis between participants in contemporary art practice (Kester 2011: 226). *Family and Community in Ireland* is an important text and continues to be a subject of interest to anthropologists, artists, sociologists and now successors (RRG 2011, 2012). In this project we collectively address the bigger story of how disciplinary endeavors affect the lives of others across generations and propose that these elements can be brought into meaningful conversation with each other through contact with and access to the archive. Through the collaborative methodology outlined here we create a space for the emergence of alternative accounts and extending the archive, linking successors' stories to the story of *Family and Community in Ireland*.

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Notes:

- ¹ For an extended discussion of the 'Rynamona Dáil', the name given to the meeting of the elders in the community, see Chapter 9, Arensberg and Kimball (1968, 2001).