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Nominated for a Founding Presidents Award

**CHOREOGRAPHED CARTOGRAPHY: TRANSLATION, FEMINIZED LABOR,
AND DIGITAL LITERACY IN HALF/ANGEL'S THE KNITTING MAP**

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half/angel, The Knitting Map (2005) installed in Millennium Hall, Cork City

In half/angel's project The Knitting Map, software was written to translate information about how busy Cork City was, into knitting stitches, and what the weather was like, into wool color. This information was uploaded to digital screens as a simple knitting pattern (knit this stitch in this color), and volunteer knitters sat at twenty knitting stations in a wooden amphitheatre in the crypt of St. Luke's Church and knitted. And they did this every day for a year . . .¹

The Knitting Map was a large-scale, durational textile installation commissioned by the executive of the European Capital of Culture for Cork 2005, a year-long festival of art and culture. *The Knitting Map*, a vast field of hand-knitted wool panels whose stitches and colors correlated to levels of urban activity and weather in Cork City, was collaboratively produced by over 2000 volunteers. The work's dimensions vary depending on the space in which it is sited. Its homey materiality blanketed the stark interior of Cork's Millennium Hall (2006), while the more intimate space of Millersville University of Pennsylvania's Ganser Gallery (2007) inspired a more topographical installation, in which the fields of *The Knitting Map* flowed and gathered in a lush aerial landscape. half/angel, a Cork-based art and performance collective, conceived *The Knitting Map* as a conceptual portrait of the city and its residents. At the same time, as a

¹ Barkun, Gilson-Ellis & Povall: 4

collaborative project that required the participation of thousands of knitters, *The Knitting Map* simultaneously served as a complex *self*-portrait of the city and its residents. As such, knit into its material, digital, and visual texts, and reception history, is an ambivalent narrative of civic, national, cultural, and gender identity.

When conceiving *The Knitting Map*, half/angel drew on discourses of contemporary art such as Minimalism, installation, digital media, abstraction, collectivity, conceptual art, and performance. Their chosen medium—textile, wool, knitting—possesses a significant discourse of its own within the domain of traditional craft, as well as contemporary practice. half/angel is hardly alone in its invocation and appropriation of knitting within the domain of contemporary art, as the work of artists such as Oliver Herring, Rosemarie Trockel, Dave Cole, and Magda Sayeg demonstrate. Yet, within an Irish context, knitting is enfolded into economic and cultural history in ways that both enrich and complicate *The Knitting Map*'s creation and reception. Processes of translation—visual, technological, generational, socio-economic, gendered, political, and national, to name a few—become paramount to the resultant narratives, intended and otherwise, conveyed by and inscribed within and on *The Knitting Map*. In particular, the acquisition of digital vocabulary, initially unfamiliar and intimidating to many participating knitters, empowered a group of women to speak through a traditional art form in an innovative voice, thereby producing knitting as a radical act, and claiming monumental space for craft.

The Knitting Map project was always an audaciously ambitious one; half/angel² rehearsed for it by spending ten years making contemporary dance and installation works which involved various motion-sensing digital technologies, and by honing a poetic sensibility that aspired to 'trick' computers into being able to see the ache of emotion. During this decade, half/angel's model of motion was the dancer's body, or the body of the individual gallery visitor. In *The Knitting Map*, half/angel exchanged an individual corpus, often a highly trained one, for the shifting turning energies of a city. They monitored its movements, and its weather, and they knitted it.

Like the collaborative artists of half/angel and the corps of volunteer knitters who made *The Knitting Map* possible, we, (Deborah Barkun and Jools Gilson), are translators—co-authors knitting a unified voice. half/angel's performance and installation practice had always involved the translation of one gesture into another. Originally, the artists wanted a satellite to provide data about how busy Cork city centre was, but eventually settled for four city centre closed-circuit cameras, and became signatories to promises to the Gardai, the Irish police, that they would not publicly broadcast or display the captured images. half/angel director Richard Povall was the only person to look directly through the eyes of these cameras, and he did so not to witness the events they captured, but to use software to analyze just how much movement was happening in front of their eyes. Through processes of averaging and collating³ the data from

² Directed by Richard Povall as well as Jools Gilson. All software and digital environments were designed by Richard Povall.

³ Richard looked at this information over many weeks, and averaged the data, and then programmed the system to upload this number to our central processor every 5 minutes. He then integrated the information from the four city centre locations by collating and averaging their numbers again, to give a single number between 1 and 25 to represent just how busy the city was every 5 minutes. He then did more averaging, and the city's level of motion generated a single number every day. We made a graduated list of stitches from 1 – 25 that moved from simple to complex, and we mapped this onto the levels of busyness generated by the city.

these cameras, Povall programmed the system to translate how busy the city was into one of 25 knitting stitches of equivalent complexity. Likewise, Povall compiled data on Cork's weather, including temperature, precipitation and wind speed, and translated it into a rich-yet-muted palette of color, redolent of the region's urban and rural landscapes.

The process of conjuring the energies of climate into an abstract cartography meant that in some sense the volunteer knitters, overwhelmingly women⁴, *were knitting* the weather. Such a communal gesture, technologically enabled, brought frosts, floods, and heat into the domestic and ordinary act of knitting. It opened its close, domestic, and feminine associations to the literal and metaphorical sky. *The Knitting Map* also made proximate the mathematical complexity of knitting difficult stitches with the energy of a city's frantic and crowded streets. By translating shifting numerical combinations into, for example, an open honeycomb cable⁵ stitch, the participants re-worked the data about Cork City's activity, *digitally* transmitted via computer monitors, and integrated it with their fingers—their digits—in processes of communal hand knitting. *The Knitting Map* allowed the prevailing cultural marginality of women-over-50 to collectively fabricate a work of originality and significance and, in doing so, re-mapped their own apparently tangential geography.⁶

The symbolic and literal empowerment of *The Knitting Map*, its playful plurality, and the fact that it made women the custodians of a wildly ambitious cartography, were not ideas that were easy to communicate, outside of the discourses of art practice and criticism. Yet many of these knitters understood their participation as a civic contribution of great material and symbolic worth.⁷ For many of these women, their involvement in *The Knitting Map* was their first involvement in an arts project.

In order to communicate *The Knitting Map*'s poetic and conceptual premises, half/angel first addressed a dilemma of language: how to effectively translate digital displays that correspond to stitches and colors to participants unfamiliar with the aesthetics, technology, and vocabulary of contemporary art. Indeed, producing a technologically mediated conceptual portrait of Cork required trust in and comfort with the technology integral to the project. Ultimately, to create an environment conducive to knitting, the technology that collected, collated, and transmitted data itself needed an interpretive apparatus to be comprehensible. Toward this end, half/angel translated their technology into familiar and purposeful forms and materials, thus mitigating feelings of intimidation that technology so often engenders. In effect, half/angel gently introduced digital technology to *The Knitting Map*'s participants, largely Irish, women over-50,

⁴ Men *were* involved in knitting *The Knitting Map*, and were always welcome. But in the end, they were a tiny minority.

⁵ *Open Honeycomb Cable* (knitting pattern where K = knit, and P = purl):

The pattern begins on the wrong side, so work 1 row knit before starting. Row 1: K2, p8, k2; rep to end. Row 2: P2, C4B (slip next 2 sts onto cable needle and hold at back of work, k2, k2 from cable needle) C4F (slip next 2 sts onto cable needle and hold at front of work, k2, k2 from cable needle), p2; rep to end. Row 3: As 1st. Row 4: P2, k8, p2; rep to end. Row 5: As 1st. Row 6: As 4th. Row 7: As 1st. Row 8: As 4th. These eight rows form pattern. Repeat." (Matthews 1984: 63)

⁶ This introductory section is adapted from Barkun & Gilson 2007.

⁷ In an article written in 2006, Alan O'Riordan reports on a public forum about *The Knitting Map*, organised to coincide with the exhibition of the work in the Millennium Hall, Cork as part of the Midsummer's Festival. He wrote - "From the knitters' own enthusiastic testimony, nobody could doubt that the map meant a great deal to the people who worked on it . . ." (O'Riordan 2006).

by enfolding it in wood and wool. Povall and Enrika Bertolini Cullen outfitted the crypt of St. Luke's Church, in which *The Knitting Map* was headquartered, to facilitate the translation of urban milieu to stitch and color. The crypt was faced in wood, emphasizing architectural contours and encasing the monitors in digital "pulpits," each one its own quiet yet industrious mode of address. Seated at these digital knitting stations, below a bank of Romanesque arched windows, the twenty knitters resembled a choir, voices materialized in rivulets of knitted wool, spilling over a wooden embankment and merging at a confluence of expanding color, pattern, and texture.

half/angel conceived *The Knitting Map* as a secular project that wedded technology with handwork, blurring the boundaries between masculine and feminine, labor and leisure, art and craft. Yet, for so many of the participants, themselves practicing Catholics, the crypt of St. Luke's implied the communal experience of worship. Cullen, a devout Catholic, labeled the design of the knitting stations a "Coptic circle" for its visual affinities to a Coptic cross (McCarthy 2005: 36 – 8). Regardless of the participants' religious convictions, these contours transformed the wired and cavernous space into a place of intimacy, in which knitting became a communal experience. By effectively contextualizing *The Knitting Map*'s digital technology, the very processes and language of "knitting Cork" becomes dialogic across generations. Here, digital media is rendered meaningful to participants previously unfamiliar with its codes. Likewise, knitting, a traditional art form, is passed to young participants, more conversant with technology than textile.⁸

If the technological bases of *The Knitting Map* required acts of translation to render them accessible, so too did the work's evolving narrative. half/angel endeavored to relay the ongoing story of a changing, breathing city through daily interpretation of data.⁹ But that alone is not sufficient to portray the lifeblood of place and the critical roles it plays in securing individual and community identity. For this, *The Knitting Map* participants became crucial not only for their facility in knitting, but also for their intimacy with Cork. If the visible product—the textile-based work of art known as *The Knitting Map*—strikes viewers, in part, due to its vast scale, its contiguity, the uniformity of its palette, and its repetitive stitches, this consistency belies the multiplicity of voices, stories, and experiences that comprise its narrative. As with any heteroglossic text, it offers no singular account of the complex relationship that people have with place. half/angel conceived *The Knitting Map* as a poly-vocal narrative that might expand the possibilities of meaning and conceptually "map" something of the complex relationships between urban spaces and inhabitants, the mysteries endemic to places and people, by channeling data about Cork through a symbolically playful collaboration of its residents. Cartography became a metaphorical practice, a way to envision the vitality of growth and motion and interaction. Yet, the communication of these theoretical approaches itself required translation in order to ignite the imaginations of an audience largely unfamiliar with the specialized discourses of contemporary art and for whom maps were legible documents charting

⁸ These two paragraphs are adapted from Barkun & Gilson 2007.

⁹ This information was also displayed in the installation space of *The Knitting Map* during 2005. This meant that visitors could view the streaming of meteorological and urban motion data on a series of monitors, directly into the crypt of St. Luke's Church. They could also see a simplified version of how this information was translated into yarn color and complexity of stitch, and then uploaded to the monitors from which the knitters took their pattern / yarn color for the day.

routes and recording topography. Indeed, many initially assumed that *The Knitting Map* would be a literal representation of Cork City. Disabusing them of this notion and effectively communicating the creative objectives of the project was a task of translation unanticipated by half/angel that forced them to confront the degree to which contemporary artistic practice and vocabulary might be removed from the experiences of those not regularly engaged with it.

The women who worked on *The Knitting Map* were articulate at reading and interpreting code into a complexity that generated singular items: sweaters, hats, blankets, or scarves. They comprehended the social value of gift-giving, they appreciated the weight of time and care intrinsic to the knitting of garments and other textiles. They knew it was often emotional labor. They also recognized the negative connotations of knitting, its lodgment in the public psyche as a joke about another appalling sweater made by granny as a Christmas gift. Many of them had experienced the shift of knitting from economic necessity to expensive hobby. They also perceived knitting as a solitary activity, even as they might knit while watching television with others. In their bones, they regarded knitting as profoundly feminine, as the domain of the female, so that even as boys and men might knit, they only did so with a troubling frisson. They realized the critical importance of tea breaks and lunch. They knew how to talk and laugh and sometimes guffaw. They also possessed the agency and facility to defend their beloved project when it was attacked, which it repeatedly was. They called-in to talk shows and spoke their minds, demanding that journalists and festival directors, who often prematurely criticized the project without viewing it, visit *The Knitting Map* for themselves. They wrote letters and knocked on doors. They disarmed half/angel of intent, by acting as if they owned the project, which of course, they did.

The most powerful aspect of translation of *The Knitting Map* involved technology, but also involved its erasure. The powerful representative strategy of making knitting and women's work monumental translated into media fury within Ireland, in particular over the confluence of significant funding and women's textile labor. The technology that was intrinsic to *The Knitting Map* project was a major part of the means by which knitting was translated into something provocative and revolutionary, the means by which knitting was connected with the sky, the civic, and the urban. It was the means by which ordinary women with ordinary skills came together to conjure a collaborative vastness of community and textile. It was also the means by which the work was commissioned in the first place; the technology moved this feminine craft from its domestic private space and spun it out into the public world of art and symbol making. It was this combination of traditional and contemporary practices that caught the imagination of Cork 2005 in choosing to commission *The Knitting Map* as one of the flagship projects for Cork's year as European Capital of Culture in 2005¹⁰. *The Knitting Map* brazenly claimed a year for its making, and invited women¹¹ of all kinds to stay with it for its journey. Yet, a significant portion of the Irish / Cork Media and public ignored the technological aspect of the work. Was the technology of *The Knitting Map* impossible to understand? Or was it the case that to acknowledge it was to comprehend that the work believed in other kinds of worlds, worlds in which the quotidian lives and labor of women were apprehended for the extraordinary choreographies that they are? By joining technology and hand knitting, women's private labor was made public and relevant. *The Knitting Map* also gave contemporary currency for what was

¹⁰ Interview with Mary McCarthy, one of the commissioners of The Knitting Map for Cork 2005, 7 February, 2007.

¹¹ Anyone was welcome to participate in *The Knitting Map* but in the end the vast majority were women.

considered by some to be an archaic practice. Jools Gilson and Richard Povall were drawn to the practice of knitting by seeing its labor as a compelling choreography. For Gilson and Povall, choreography had always been a kind of mapping, and in bringing together groups of knitters, for *The Knitting Map*, such cartography became powerfully inflected through the contemporary Irish moment of 2005. Instead of engaging with what the technology did to knitting, the press focused almost entirely on *The Knitting Map*'s level of funding, and within Ireland, the work became the site of major controversy.

'An Army of Knitters'¹²

The Irish media generated unanticipated debates about *The Knitting Map* that persisted for years (2003–6), and came quite soon to repeatedly refer to the project as 'controversial', something that confounded the collaborative group of half/angel as well as their community of knitters. *The Knitting Map* was clearly not the site of *conventional* controversy; directors had not misappropriated its public funding and the project contained no provocative imagery or language. What then, had failed in this process of public understanding?

'... a useless monstrosity'¹³

It is remarkable that such negative responses to *The Knitting Map* were then, peculiar to Cork and Ireland. Significantly, an international audience seemed to read the work in different terms. The London-based Smartlab Digital Media Institute; the Arts and Culture at The Council of Europe of Strasbourg, France; Amsterdam's European Cultural Foundation; Dance City in Newcastle, United Kingdom; and the Department of Visual Arts at Millersville University, outside Lancaster, Pennsylvania, all invited half/angel to develop further projects on the strength of visits to *The Knitting Map*.

International media coverage by press sources from Austria, Finland, Norway, Poland, France and the UK, including the BBC, also viewed the work through a seemingly different lens.¹⁴ Such interest arose from an acknowledgement of the work as a community project, a digital art work, a durational installation, a textile project, and finally as a work that refused a difference between creative innovation and the craft of ordinary women, a work that entwined femininity and civic cartography and made both powerfully present.

'daft'¹⁵

But within Ireland, the project generated controversy. This was fuelled by speculation about the level of *The Knitting Map*'s public funding. half/angel received €258,000 (\$350,000) over three years to realize the project, funding that primarily financed a staff of five, office rental, and the renovation, outfitting, and operation of an arts center for a year. During the years of its development and production, the funders forbade the collective to reveal to the media the level of

¹² (Mythen 2005: 10)

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *Der Standard* (Austria, Alioth 2005), *Helsingen Sannomat* (Finland, Sipilä 2005), *Stavanger Aftenblad* (Norway, Andreassen 2005), *Wysokie Obcasy* (Poland, Panków 2005), *Newzy.fr* (France, Guilcher 2005), *BBC news* (UK, Davis 2005), *The Guardian* (UK, Glancey 2005), *Vogue Knitting* (UK, Fawcett 2005) and *Simply Knitting* (UK, Bradley 2005). *The Knitting Map* was also the subject of a chapter in a PHD thesis in 2009 (Sotelo 2009).

¹⁵ (Mick Hannigan, Director of the Cork Film Festival, quoted in Lynch 2005: 25)

financing, a gesture that fuelled speculation and controversy.¹⁶ Other identically supported artistic contributions to Cork 2005, such as the temporary exhibition of Daniel Libeskind's *Eighteen Turns* in Fota House (May – Dec 2005), did not attract criticism over funding.

The negative media attention to *The Knitting Map* so rarely referred to the actual work itself, that it sometimes seemed as if it had little to do with it. Rather, the lattice-work of meanings that *The Knitting Map* laid down in public met with the social, political and historical moment in such a way as to allow something difficult and damaged to see the light of day. half/angel had not anticipated that *The Knitting Map* was capable of becoming a site of controversy within Cork and Ireland. What they imagined remained still sheltered within the work and available to be witnessed; gentle, slow; tangling tides and skies with yarn; marking the ebb and surge of presence with knots. Yet within Ireland, a different kind of reception attended its production. This was a reception in which the scale, duration, and femininity of *The Knitting Map* became a provocation. For a contingent of an Irish audience and Irish media, women knitting cartographies could not mean anything beyond 'a pack of oul' biddies knitting.' (Lynch 2005: 26)

“If you see an old woman in a fairy tale, be very very careful.”¹⁷

Jools Gilson has often tried to make the invisible labor of femininity powerfully present. In 1997 she hung 10,000 sewing needles from red thread from a gallery ceiling, eliciting oddly gendered responses; many women wondered aloud about the vastness of the labor of threading so many needles, while men who visited wondered more quietly about what they perceived as the violence of the work.¹⁸ Kieran McCarthy, a Cork historian, published *The Knitting Map Speaks* in 2005 based on interviews with people who worked on or were connected with *The Knitting Map*. This is a significant document, in which one of the commissioners of the work, the Irish poet Tom McCarthy reflects on the media controversy:

Historically, The Knitting Map to me is also an important reminder of the importance of women's work. I remember that during [the] Cork 800 [festival] a fantastic anthology was brought together by the Cork Women's Poetry Circle; it was called The Box Under the Bed. That work, which would be considered women's work, was visible to the public eye and in many ways the story of women's action in the city was anthologised. When that small anthology was published, it was attacked in the press. It was actually mocked. The Knitting Map, twenty years later, has also been subject to attack. It interests me about Irish and Cork society that when women's work is made visible, it somehow attracts negativity from sources in the media. Why is it that women's activity attracts negative feeling in the media?

(McCarthy, Tom 2005: 124)

Removed of nuance, and bound up in the literal act of knitting, the most powerful response to *The Knitting Map* within Ireland was astonishment over the amount of money and time that had been dedicated to something so apparently inconsequential and irrelevant.

¹⁶ It was probably also the case that when *The Knitting Map* was commissioned in 2003, the Executive of Cork 2005 expected their budget to be far higher than it eventually was, so that funding for the project ended up as a much larger proportion of the overall budget than was intended.

¹⁷ Jools Gilson, *Spinstren*, dance theatre production, 1992.

¹⁸ *mouthplace* exhibition, Triskel Arts Centre, Cork, with Richard Povall.

‘“I’m sure it’s valid in its own way,” concedes Mick Hannigan with a smile.’¹⁹

Because the project was a flagship one, this was inextricably bound to a powerful Irish sense of not wanting to be represented internationally in this way. The history of cartography in and of Ireland is closely tied to Britain’s colonial project to claim Ireland’s territory as its own. Brian Friel’s play *Translations* explores the poetic and political impact of this history (Friel 1981). Sometimes this history has had violent personal consequences for the cartographer; in the early seventeenth century, Richard Bartlett, an English army officer under Charles Blount, Lord Deputy Mountjoy, depicted the taming of Ulster and the unruly O’Neill in cartographic form: “Barlett seems to have been beheaded by Donegal militants who in the words of one account, ‘would not have their countrie discovered.’” (cited by Smyth 2007: 17, from Andrews 2008, then in progress).

While it may seem difficult to imagine outside of Ireland, half/angel’s failure to communicate the aspirations and multi-layered resonance of this work to an Irish and especially a Cork audience, meant that it remained lodged in understanding as literal knitting, and associated with the homey craft of a bygone Ireland, and such a coalescence produced an unbearable flagship project for Cork 2005. Historical moment did not or could not allow for such craft to be used as a way to radically rework meaning. The historic feminization of Ireland by colonial Britain exacerbated this response.²⁰ Having been symbolically feminized as a term of abuse, being represented internationally by an excess of femininity fuelled public rage. It did not help that both directors of the project, Gilson and Povall, are English. What this work mapped then, was not so much a year in the life of a city, but its underlying injuries—symbolic, colonial, and gendered. And its most powerful cartography was its iteration of old history, not as something ‘way back when’, but as something stridently present in the contemporaneity of 2005.

The media furor about *The Knitting Map* was in a powerful sense the result of a *failure* of translation. Placed within Irish Culture in 2005 at the height of the Irish boom years, Ireland was a country snagged between a recently impoverished and postcolonial past and sudden extreme wealth. Such a context made for an uneasy self-confidence. *The Knitting Map* sought to give femininity a voice within this Irish context, the media controversy, rarely about the quality of the work itself, sought to refuse this gesture, to place feminine craft firmly back in its traditional place. So that the erasure or absence of a discourse about the technology in *The Knitting Map* became a political gesture about what is worthy of public funding, and who has the right to call themselves artists. Older women knitting was (apparently) too powerfully charged a category of the disavowed to warrant such major funding. And older women harnessing the potential of emergent technologies, was more incendiary still. Thus as the piece maps the experiences of Cork and its residents, it unwittingly became a map of the controversy, itself.

The international reception of *The Knitting Map* was overwhelmingly positive, and the powerful fear that seemed to drive the Irish response—that being represented internationally by a vast

¹⁹ (Lynch 2005: 26)

²⁰ For a discussion of this depiction of Ireland as feminine in relation to colonial Britain, see Tovey, Share & Corcoran 2007, and Cairns & Richards 1988.

knitting project might lead to ridicule—never materialized.²¹ Internationally the work was always seen as based on a dialectic between the craft of hand knitting and the technology that drove this knitting, and made plural the act of winding yarn around two sticks. Knitters made the work by knitting it, but they also made it simply by living in Cork City,²² by participating in the urban movement that generated stitches. In this sense the work was literally and poetically *of* the city—this was its claim to monumental space—not only because it was eventually of such vast scale, but because it audaciously took a city as its compositional tool. The connection between yarn color and weather, shifted this dialectic to one that operated experientially—participants knitted a weather they had cowered-in at bus stops, or basked-in on their way home. So they had ‘done’ the movement of the city, and they had ‘felt’ the weather; effect and affect. These literal, poetic, and metaphorical connections are enabled by the technology that underpinned the work. Without the technology, the work is essentially a lot of knitting, indeed, a lot of very well funded knitting, and this was more than a contingent of an Irish audience could cope with.

The Knitting Map, then, read to Irish and Cork audiences as a web that made visible and palpable prevailing assumptions about value, art, women, and feminine labor. *The Knitting Map* cleared space for working-class Irish women-over-50 to produce powerful public meaning, and the Irish media response surged against such a gesture. But half/angel has the knitting, rolled up in four boxes, and hidden safely away in Cork, and has accompanied it to the United States, where they unleashed it in a gallery and watched its alchemy creep up the spines of the visitors, undoing their composure. *The Knitting Map* accomplishes this because it is made slowly together by the collaborative energy of thousands, a feminine work of time; of seconds, days, weeks and months; and now years. And, it is a kind of lodestone for potential time, and an assertion of unutterably powerful presence, so powerful that to bring it to the light of day could cause a city, and sometimes a country, to rise up in fury. But though half/angel does not own it, they guard it, because there will come a time, when they will once again, unroll *The Knitting Map* and let its meanings play again in other contexts.

²¹ This was a fear of being represented (once again) as a country of backward rurality, when colonial memory of just such a gesture was (is) so recent.

²² Not all participants were residents of Cork City, but the vast majority were.

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