**INTERVIEW L08-SG1: PAUL ORD**

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Interviewer: Dr Fearghus Roulston
Interviewee: Paul Ord
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Location: University of Brighton
Transcriber: Dr Fearghus Roulston

Textual Note: Annotations and observations appear in square brackets (e.g. [pauses], [laughs]). Partial, interrupted or unfinished utterances are denoted by a dash. False starts, filler words and non-lexical utterances (e.g. 'um', 'hmm') are not generally transcribed. Time codes appear at ten-minute intervals in square brackets in bold type.

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FR: Okay, that's recording, so if you could just start us off by saying your name and today's date.

PO: Okay, my name is Paul Ord and I don't actually know today's date, I think it's the thirteenth.

FR: I'm just going to check myself [laughs], the fourteenth.

PO: The fourteenth, it's the fourteenth of January 2020.

FR: Okay, thanks very much. So just to start off, I'll ask where and when were you born?

PO: So I was born in Belfast in 1982, and I was born in the City Hospital. My kind of appreciation of the circumstances or knowledge of the circumstances of my birth apart from that are pretty vague, I don't really know anything more about it. My mum likes to joke that I was born in time for lunch, cos I was born kind of around midday I think, and she often makes that joke in conjunction with some kind of observation on me having a really good appetite, so it'll be like, born in time for lunch, always in time for lunch, and so on.

FR: Okay, well, that's something to know about the, and were your parents living in Belfast at that time?

PO: So they were living in Glengormley, so kind of not far, and we lived in kind of a little, little suburban house which like, the inside of which I don't really have any clear memory of, I guess because I was there only really for the first couple of years of my life, although I do have a memory which my parents, when I've described it to them, attribute to that place, somehow, which is of like, resin from, coming out of a tree, so where the bark of a tree cracks and there's kind of this sap leaks out of the tree and it creates this soft, squidgy, glassy surface which, and I've described it, after describing the tree, this sort of dark, deeply ridged bark, quite, you know, a small tree in the front garden, my mum's like, that's the cherry tree in the front garden at Glengormley, which is odd because, well, maybe not odd,

but if, if that were the case, then that would probably be my earliest memory, I would say, yeah.

FR: You would've been quite young, you were saying.

PO: Yeah, so I would've been less than two, which seems quite remarkable really because everything apart from that is pretty, you know, it's pretty vague, and my brother's got far more vivid memories of that time because he was just that little bit older, so he was, you know, going to pre-school or whatever at that time. So a lot of what I know about that time is things I've been told, so, you know, I don't know what they're called, those things that kids are put in and they used to hang them in the doorway with like, elasticated supports, apparently I'd be plonked in that quite a lot of the time because my mum was quite busy and my brother would barge past and he'd always say excuse me Paul, cos my brother was quite precocious in various ways, but in terms of language definitely, so he like, was kind of into articulating himself quite clearly at quite a young age, but obviously he was quite a polite–

FR: [laughs] Cos that's what I was going to say–

PO: Little boy as well, you know [laughs].

FR: [laughs] Astonishing frankness, yeah.

PO: Yeah, yeah, so yeah, so that's kind of what I understand about that time or think I know about that time, yeah.

FR: And do you know what your parents were doing in Belfast?

PO: Well, my mum, until we were born, so until my brother was born and in the early part of my mum and dad's relationship, I mean, I know that my mum was working, well, she worked in a bank in Belfast and my dad did kind of various things, I mean, I know that on my birth certificate his profession is listed as industrial engineer, and I think that, I'm not sure really what that, that seems to be one of those like, catch-all terms that probably doesn't exist now, but there's probably equivalents now in like, relating to contemporary technology, but I know at one point he was working in what I suppose we'd call now like, reprographics, so like, with photocopying machines and the TV repair and things like that. I know he worked at one point for Ferguson, the now-defunct TV company, and he did, he did repair, but he also then I think was involved in like, sales and maybe the accounting side of things because that's what he went on then to do much later on, I think he had experience in that, but my mum worked, I don't think he worked in the city, my mum worked in the city, in Belfast, and she [pauses], that, I think that led her to find herself in some quite difficult situations, I mean, and she remembers, for example, car bombs going off near to her offices, she remembers accidentally passing a police cordon where they'd closed off a section of the city near her offices and she turned around to find a crowd of people shouting at her and eventually there was a controlled explosion kind of very close to her, and these things [pauses] she, I think I remember being told quite early on when we were kids, you know, being told about that stuff happening, and it's taken decades I think

for us to as like, siblings, to realise the potential significance for her and my dad of being of in situations like that. They kind of weren't, I don't think they were fully appreciated and I'm not really sure why, it wasn't that we didn't care, I think it was just that it seemed slightly unreal and maybe we didn't make the kind of connections that we might have made as we do now as adults between that and maybe certain aspects of our parents' behaviour, even like, my, my mum is, she's quite a nervous person, she'll jump at the slightest noise, you know, things like that, you know, and you start to think well, is there some kind of psychological, even almost like, physical connection between that and being near these kind of sudden, abrupt explosions and events and things like that, so I think that what's, I guess what's interesting is that talking about the very early years of my life and what my parents were doing, the subject really quickly turns to their experience of the Troubles because probably, in what I remember of what they've told me, and what occurred to them to tell me, is that which was most significant, and that plays, and obviously that conflict plays a large part in making that decision, and I know that one of the, one of the reasons that they ultimately thought about coming over to England was because they were worried about what might happen to them as a so-called mixed couple, I mean, cos they were Protestant and Catholic, my dad was Protestant, my mum was Catholic, and I couldn't tell you the details of the case, but my mum knows that at the time, not that long after they got married, there was a couple who were shot and killed and she, for that, for, ostensibly for that reason, it's likely to have been more complex than that I would think, but, or maybe not, but that certainly was what she remembered anyway as the justification for this assassination. I think that, from what I get of my, certainly my dad's view, my dad I think completely lost patience with Northern Ireland, that's the impression I got, was that he, even in later years wouldn't, he didn't really even I don't think even have the patience to talk about the political conflict anymore in sympathetic terms, he just, I suppose he felt justified as well in just saying, it's nonsense, you know, I've got **[00:10:00]** no patience for it anymore, the grievances are unjustifiable, you know, he didn't really I don't think understand it, but certainly I get the impression that their decision would have been based as much on just losing patience as fear for their safety, just kind of a sense that they just didn't want to be part of a culture and society in which those things were possible, that that would be offered as an explanation for an atrocity and that people would go oh right, well, that kind of explains it, even that was I think, even on the kind of on a banal level they were offended by that, so they, yeah, which is why eventually we, we moved over here, or partly.

FR: Do you know how your parents met at all?

PO: Well, they, yeah, they met on the bus on the way to school, so they'd known each other since they were sixteen and I, I think that, as far as I'm aware, any, any like, supposed differences in terms of class or politics or religion between their backgrounds and their families were irrelevant to them from the beginning I think. I think they would've felt they had more in common straight away than not, and a lot of that would've been to do with music, so, I mean, they were sixteen in '69, so I guess, I mean, my dad and my mum both, you know, when they talk about that time it's often through the music as well, so it's like, you know, Led Zeppelin's first album, for example, coming out, and my dad, you know, he remembers the like, the shock that people felt on hearing that kind of music and that was really exciting I think and the, you know, they, I think they had fun, you know, they went to a lot of parties, they did a lot of things that I never thought to do as a teenager and they

trans-, by the sounds of it transgressed a lot of boundaries that it felt unnecessary for me to at that age like, I think that, you know, people were trying out acid and maybe slightly ill-advisedly taking it whilst listening to like, King Crimson and early Genesis and stuff, it was probably fairly risky.

FR: The sixties really happened in Belfast, people forget that there was a sixties in Belfast as well.

PO: Yeah, I think, and I think that's true and I think, certainly my dad, I mean, when my dad, you know, told me about it, it was mostly my dad who talked about the music really, and he was a musician, so, I mean, maybe that makes sense, but I was surprised really I suppose at like, at who he got to see, you know, like, this, this, it made, it did make it clear to me I think even just, even when I was a teenager, that this idea of Belfast as being some kind of backwater was just offensively inaccurate, you know, that him going to see, I mean, he missed out on Hendrix, but just because his parents wouldn't let him go, but he saw, you know, he saw Zeppelin pretty much straight away, Rory Gallagher and Clapton and, you know, all of the, you know, it didn't pass anybody by in that part of the world, you know, that stuff, and I think maybe that's what's so weird and uncanny sometimes about that conflict, about, you know, this place which in many respects, certainly in terms of, you know, like, culture, architecture, music, society, was kind of not far removed from, for example, the north of England, I think a lot of the comparisons between Northern Ireland, for example, certainly Belfast as a city and, I didn't go anywhere in the UK that was like Belfast until I went to Manchester and Liverpool and then I was like, okay, this is, there is something going on here, there is like, a kind of cultural accord or architectural accord or whatever between these places and even in terms of the attitude of people, but this conflict which seems at the same time so odd is also really banal, you know, that it takes place in these entirely recognisable places, and then there's another further layer to that which is that you, unless you try to you don't know anything about it if you live in England, you know, so there are tanks on British streets, but nobody, nobody knows about that.

FR: Well, that's interesting, and I think the relationship between you living in England and sort of knowing something about what's happening in Northern Ireland is interesting.

PO: Yeah, I think so and I think like, I mean, look at like, the nineties, for example, you know, where in that period, you know, the period like, leading up to the Good Friday Agreement, which I have a fair, you know, I've got a fairly good understanding of now through historical study, but at the time as like, a fifteen-year-old, sixteen-year-old, I was much more interested in the fact that, you know, Radiohead were my new favourite band than I was about what Tony Blair or previously John Major were doing in Stormont, you know, I wasn't interested, particularly interested, even, even as, in inverted commas, somebody from Northern Ireland, and I probably, I think I had, almost definitely that like, insufferable, very adolescent sense of entitlement, so I was, as somebody from Northern Ireland I was entitled not to care about it, which is really paradoxical and really odd, but I was entitled to dismiss it and I definitely didn't really think about it, but I knew more about, I think I knew more about what was happening in the Balkans than I did about the Northern Irish conflict and that is interesting in itself, and for me now as, obviously as somebody who, you know, has studied history and media discourse and so on, I, I put, you know, I would be tempted to

almost immediately put that down to like, prominence within circulation of certain stories and things like that, and that's part of the story, but at the time obviously I wasn't aware of that, I just took it for granted that I knew more about one thing than the other and [pauses] this other conflict which was happening in this sort of strange, more unusual part of the world to me, it was kind of, it made, it just made sense, it was just kind of logical that that was more prominent and more understood than the one that was happening a forty-five minute plane flight away, which is really weird.

FR: I get what you mean about feeling entitled or allowed not to care about it. Do you remember your parents responding or reacting to the peace process?

PO: [pauses] I remember [pauses], I remember my dad having in '97 a very definite sense of optimism and my mum shared that to an extent, but I think that of the two she was perhaps the less, to an extent less politically engaged, but only subtly. That might, may even be a bit of a disservice, I think maybe, maybe she was, she had gone through a stage of a brief political appreciation and then arrived at a cynicism that my dad hadn't yet, maybe, maybe that was also the case, but certainly that time, with the, you know, the landslide Labour victory in '97, I remember, I remember even people at school being cheerful the day after that election, which is really odd, you know, like, people who were fifteen, sixteen being really excited about it and that was, I think, quite in-, that was quite infectious, and my dad did genuinely think that something substantial had been achieved in Northern Ireland and that, although I didn't really, I didn't necessarily appreciate, well, I definitely didn't appreciate at the time the complexity of it, of the, the extent of the kind of, what's the term like, brinkmanship between different parties involved, I didn't, I didn't appreciate that. I did understand that something which would previously have been thought very unlikely had happened, you know, that there was, that maybe something had been gained for Northern Ireland as a place, **[00:20:00]** that it, that I think in my mind translated very quickly into the idea of it being safer, which is interesting.

FR: That is interesting.

PO: That it was more, it was like, straight away, it was like, oh right, okay, well, now, now, you know.

FR: So would you have had a sense previously of it as unsafe?

PO: Yeah, because of things that you overheard and because of things that you saw, so I remember, I mean, we went to Northern Ireland a lot throughout my childhood and up until my grandad actually took the slightly unusual step when he was older, I mean, he'd lost his wife, my granny had died in '93, so quite, quite young, and he, my grandad moved to England, he actually moved to Liverpool in what would have been his, then his seventies, to live with his son, my uncle, and then he had then later moved to live with my mum, so he was living with my mum in Hertfordshire, so he lived, he moved across the water because my mum and her brothers were worried about him being on his own, [pauses] which is, I sometimes think was a mistake, but that's a whole other story really, but I remember on our trips to Northern Ireland to see our grandparents, so my mum's parents who lived in Enniskillen and my dad's mum who had lost her husband, my grandad, when I was really

young, I don't even remember him, he was English, he was from County Durham, and we would get the ferry usually, so we could bring the car, and that would involve doing a border crossing, and so I've got a really vivid memory of going through the border crossing, I wouldn't be able to tell you where it was exactly, but it was armed by young British soldiers with machine guns, you know, and they would, the way I remember it, which is probably inaccurate, but who cares, is the driver's window literally being tapped with the barrel of a machine gun, but I don't, I'm not sure if that's maybe something that I've taken from something else, and interestingly the, the entrance to Northern Ireland, the gateway, I was thinking now probably was made of reinforced metal of some kind, but in my mind it's, you know, it's like a fortress wall from the realm of fantasy or science fiction, this kind of impenetrable boundary which is then opened at the kind of the will of the people guarding it, which is weird because that is, that kind of scenario is juxtaposed with the lovely sort of like beautifully cosy environment of my grandparents' bungalow in Northern Ireland, and there is this sort of slightly uncanny sense like, in all of those memories I think because of that, and another thing that's bound up in that is, I was thinking about this actually the other day, which was that I, when I was a kid I, I remember having this vague understanding of what Irishness was, that it was an attribute that I had and that it had originated from this other geographical location, and bound up with that was Christianity, or Catholicism specifically, and the language and imagery of that, of which my little Catholic primary school was an island. So it was like, there was this long and tenuous, but definite, thread connecting this location which was, which had the same kind of images like, of the Sacred Heart and the same smells, whatever they might have been, as these locations which we would go to in Northern Ireland, which were the original, they were, that was the point of origin, but weirdly I think that produced the sense that I've only really recognised as an adult of Christianity itself originating from Northern Ireland, that it didn't come from the Abrahamic traditions of the Middle East, that Catholicism was Irish, which is really interesting. So we, we had on one, in one sense, this really kind of lovely, affectionate family Christmas in Northern Ireland, albeit one that was kind of earned through passing through this strange border, which at the time was kind of exciting and intimidating at the same time, and one in which that, all of that kind of affection and like brand new Lego sets and things like that, were then right next to these kind of oddly pagan and barbaric images of a weeping Jesus with an exposed heart, and then stories about the Enniskillen bombing itself, which I don't really remember fully, but I just, I remember, what I do remember is being in a car and driving past where it had happened and looking for something which obviously wasn't there, so, you know, you're looking for a trace of this event, which obviously is absent, and so there's nothing there tangibly to explain the apparent significance of that event, and then really quickly you're in like, the local shopping centre with the same like, disconcertingly, the same clothes brands and stuff as at home, and it's like, this constant gravitating between the familiar and the unusual I think, which I found really interesting and really exciting, and then another layer is the supernatural, which was talked about quite openly by my granny, my mum's mum.

FR: That's interesting.

PO: Like, she had seen ghosts like, without a doubt, and her grandad had told her, it might actually, no, I think it was, it was my mum's grandad had told her when she was little, my mum, that he'd seen fairies in the back of the garden, and she was convinced that he meant

it, but I don't, obviously, he was maybe just, just convincing a child that he had. But these kind of places where we visited, in particular, this otherwise really lovely, cosy little bungalow in Northern Ireland, were kind of like, transformed in the right circumstances into places where you might come across like, a spectre [laughs], which for me as a kid was terrifying, you know, so if you had to go to the toilet on your own you'd have to go down this dark corridor and go past a room where, without any thoughts of the consequences, your granny the night before had told you she had seen the white figure of her mother at the foot of her bed, you know, and that, the fact that it was talked about in that way was quite, is quite interesting, and I put down a lot of my interests now I think to all of these experiences like, particularly my interest in the supernatural and the uncanny, it's like, there has to be some explanation, well, not that there has to be an explanation, but there's a pretty, there's one that's pretty apparent in those experiences, yeah.

FR: It's really interesting that you've got such a rich set of associations with those visits, specifically, with going back.

PO: Those visits were, I think they were really magical. It's also cos we saw things that we'd never have seen at home, so like, the landscape of Northern Ireland was more wild and impressive and sometimes bleak than anything that we would've seen where we were actually growing up in, which was in rural Cambridgeshire **[00:30:00]** and then Hertfordshire, which are kind of very, quite benign, sedentary places in lots of ways, not without their own like, atmospheric qualities like, undoubtedly, but not really the same order of like, perhaps, richness or impressiveness, and obviously that's an entirely subjective judgement, but, as like, the Mourne Mountains or, you know, the Marble Arch caves or even just the sight of the coast from a ferry when you're doing the crossing on the Irish Sea and all of these experiences, the sense of scale of the sea and of the ferry itself and, they're kind of, they are, I think they're sort of encouraging this sense of being transported in more ways than one like, literally, through this, these large spaces which are just awe-inspiring anyway for a child, but then also you're moving to a different, a different realm of culture and speech and politics and, and it's the place you're told you're from, so it's like, you're from here, and that kind of on one level makes perfect sense and on another is quite alienating because you're like, okay, well, I am, but it doesn't mean I know what's going on, it doesn't mean I understand it or know it. I couldn't, if you'd told me, if you'd asked me when I was fourteen years old even to list the names of the Six Counties, I wouldn't have been able to tell you I don't think, I was that ignorant, and it was only later that I made a conscious effort to do that, because I'd certainly wouldn't just have picked it up through my like, daily conversation, you know.

FR: Well, that takes us, I think let's jump back slightly, so you lived in Belfast until you were twoish.

PO: Yeah.

FR: And then your parents decided to leave, in your memory or in your sense, broadly out of a kind of frustration with the political, social environment in Northern Ireland.

PO: Yeah, and I think also there were economic factors as well. I think that they felt that maybe the quality of life they wanted would be more easily attained in England than in Northern Ireland.

FR: And so they moved to England, and where to, initially?

PO: So, to, well, they lived in Welwyn Garden City, which had and still has I think quite a large Irish community, and they, their early experiences there, they lived in a small flat which had come, they had to jump on because it had kind of just become available I think through the housing association, and they, they had nothing at all like, they were sleeping on concrete and their fridge was a second-hand fridge that my mum had passed in the street and like, hauled home I think on her own, and their early, their early years there were quite, I think quite tricky, and that, well, that actually, so just to, you know, make the chronology a little bit clearer, that actually kind of led up to my older brother's birth in England, so they lived in England first.

FR: Oh okay, I was trying to figure that out cos I was thinking you're not there in Welwyn Garden City.

PO: Not yet, no, so, so yeah, sorry, I probably should've made this a wee bit clearer, that's the problem when you remember things for stupid emotional reasons rather than chronological clarity, so yeah, my parents, my parents at different stages moved to, so my dad was there looking for and finding work, my mum joined him, they were there in the late seventies, they remember, for example, the really hot summer of '76 in, in England. My brother was born in 1980 and he was born in Welwyn Garden City, which is in Hertfordshire, it's about forty miles north of London, or forty minutes away from London or so, and that's, that's a new town, so that was built in the 1920s and thirties, it's quite an interesting place in its own right, and it was there then that after my parents moved back to Northern Ireland and I was born there, for economic reasons I think, work, being close to parents, having a bit of support with their child, childcare and things like that, that I was then born in 1980 and then we came back, and then stayed, so that was like, the last move was in '84, but we didn't live in Welwyn Garden City again, we lived in a house that my dad had bought on sight in the days, or he'd put an offer in, in the days before you could see listings online or whatever, so my dad basically came, and this like, really, I found this really poignant in a way, I suppose just because there's something so tangible about it, but he came back to Ireland to show my mum the house that he'd bought, in, with a photograph of it, he was like, this is the house that I've got for us in this village called Gamlingay in Cambridgeshire and that's where we're going to live, and then that's where we lived, and three years later my sister was born in the Rosie Hospital in Cambridge, so that was my, most of my most vivid childhood memories are of this Cambridgeshire village.

FR: So what was, what was that like?

PO: It was really nice, I think it was a really, really lovely three or four years cos after, cos we moved to Welwyn Garden Ci-, we moved to Welwyn Garden City when I was six, and I lived there until I went to uni at the age of twenty, twenty-one, and that was really nice, it was, it was a really nice little house and I liked it round there, I mean, I had, even then I really liked,

I was a weird little boy like, even then I really liked like, old churches and graveyards and like, going in the car somewhere so we could go for a country walk and stuff, I really loved all of that stuff, and still do, but it's just, I think, I find it a bit creepy that I didn't prefer TV and [laughs] eating Rice Krispies at eleven in the morning in front of *Transformers* or whatever, but like, that, that's what I preferred and I really liked that. We didn't live in an old house, but we, the, I think that the school building that I went to was a, I think that was like, a late nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century schoolhouse that was still being used in the eighties and I really like, I think when I went past that fairly recently in the car, obviously I was shocked at how small it was, which is the way it always is, but I was also like, impressed at how nice a building it was as well and I've got a real fondness for those old school buildings, there's quite a lot of them in Brighton, many of them are now apartments obviously, but those old nineteenth-century, late nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century schoolhouses with the little bell towers and the large white-frame windows and high ceilings, they, I've got really, I've got fond memories of going to that school. But I remember, one thing I remember though is the sense of like, differentness in pronunciation because I think that, although my accent's not that discernible to people who don't really know what they're looking for, it was stronger then apparently, which is also really weird, you know, that there's this part of you that you have no memory of, but people can tell you that you once, they can tell you you once had an attribute that you no longer **[00:40:00]** possess is a really weird thing in itself, so, you know, I'd, and my dad would do impressions of how I spoke when I was a little boy, you know, he'd be like, you know, you'd say [adopts a Northern Irish accent] mommy, you know, it wasn't mummy, it was, you'd say mommy and daddy, and no, I'm not, you know, stop being cheeky, no, I'm not being cheeky, and all that, and I know it's that, I don't remember, you know, talking like that. But I took that accent to school with me and that, I remember people correct-, I remember other kids correcting me when I spoke and I, for, I don't think, from the like, the emotional aspect of those memories, I clearly didn't understand why they were doing it, and my brother says he remembers people being kind of like, patronisingly complimenting my mum on her accent and him even as a little boy hating them for it like, their being kind of like, aw isn't the way you say that lovely, you know, that kind of like, so I think I was kind of aware of all of that stuff even at that age. But it was only really when we were at Welwyn, when I was, when we moved to Welwyn Garden City and I went to a Catholic primary school and there were other kids there who came from Irish backgrounds [pauses] that I was kind of aware of gradations of Englishness or Irishness, depending on which way you decide to look at it, you know, there'd be people who were, they seemed more Irish, but they had English accents, so you'd go round to their house and the traces of Ireland would be more vivid or they'd have a grandparent that lived with them that had a really strong Irish accent, or they'd have the Irish flag up in the house, and I remember a kid called Barry Lagan, I mean, his name was about as Irish as you can get, you know, he's named after a river in Ireland, Barry Lagan, but, you know, [adopts a Cockney accent] he'd talk like that, you know, and his family all talked like that, so it was like, it was a bit different there, having a sense of like, what it, what like, being Irish was, and I think that sort of what developed there was a slight sort of [pauses], in me anyway, I think what happened in that period like, between, say, six and eleven, before going to secondary school, there'd already been established this sense of me being one or the other at will, you know, so Irishness was something you could tune up or tune down depending on what circumstances you were in. So when you went on holiday back to Northern Ireland to see grandparents, your Irishness came out, when you went home,

where you spoke to your grandparents on the phone or you heard somebody else with a Northern Irish accent, but that at school, surrounded by people with like, Home Counties accents, it retreated and it was, and I think I remember mentioning this to you when we met before Christmas, but that was something that my brother would tease me for, quite, with like, a, you know, a merciless psychological astuteness.

FR: Older brothers, huh.

PO: Yeah, he'd be like, he would, you know, he would, in not a particularly nice way, point out that I was speaking in the way that I didn't at home or that my mannerisms were different or whatever, you know, and he'd like, pathologise this [laughs], he'd be like, maybe you're a psychopath, you know, like, just, maybe there's something wrong with you, maybe you're, yeah, maybe you're like, amoral or something, you're a social chameleon anyway Paul, or whatever, and I'd be like, what are you talking about, it's normal, everybody does it and, but I think it was true that he didn't, and that's really, and I've always found that interesting, I think it is true that his accent didn't vary and doesn't vary as much, and he is less concerned as a person as well with being agreeable than I am, and I think that that, there might then be a kind of a connection between those two things, it makes sense that there would be, you know, he's always been more like, well, I'm, this is me, and the world might want me to do this, but it doesn't mean I'm going to, and that doesn't, you know, like, that causes obstacles for him, you know, he's had his own struggles as a result of that, but certainly I've been tempted in the past to think that he was somebody of greater integrity because of it, which I don't think's true, but that was the way that it felt, you know, that he hadn't sold himself out, compromised on his cultural identity or whatever, whereas for me it's always been really amorphous I think. But it's funny the way that things come back or they, those questions start to resurface, because now that, because of the UK leaving the European Union, I've been prompted to kind of think about those things again, you know, like, I have a, my partner's Polish and I want, as she currently does, to have the freedom to go and live and work in the EU with ease if necessary, and it's kind of through that slightly ironic and convoluted route that I'm coming to, you know, get hold of my first Irish passport, which is funny, you know, so it's like, via my maintaining a European national identity or whatever, international identity, cultural identity, that I am kind of solidifying or objectifying an Irish one, that's quite funny. But I think I knew back then that, in a way that's different to the way that I know it and understand it now, that all of these things are kind of constructions, you know, I didn't think about it in those terms then.

FR: But just the capacity to move in and out of different identities depending on the situation I guess gives you a sense of them as constructed I guess.

PO: As non-essential.

FR: Exactly.

PO: Yeah, you have that automatically and I think that that informs your approach to other things without a doubt, particularly politics more widely, so it was really easy for me I think from quite a young age to recognise the absolute absurdity of any attempts to conflate

national and racial identities or aspects of an individual in any kind of, any hint of like, jingoism in British politics or press, I was I think very sensitive to its nonsensical nature, and I think that that's common to people who have got this sort of dual nationality or can recognise that these things shift at will, and it's really about what you, it's about identification with something outside you, or something that maybe is solid, you know, I mean, obviously there are, there are, you know, important institutions that go alongside these national identities in which, if you like, lots of things that people experience on an individual level, you know, they, they produce, they co-operate and construct these things which are solid and helpful, like schools, for example, or community centres or, you know, they are, they're solid things, you know, they're not constructions in that sense.

FR: Well, I wanted to go back to the question of school actually. So you mentioned that you went to a Catholic school, and was that, was Catholicism or was the church a big part of your kind of family life growing up?

PO: We had, I remember we had the house that we moved to blessed, so I remember the priest coming out and blessing the rooms with holy water, which we did, I don't know, maybe at his insistence [laughs], who knows, I think it, I already, I mean, even at that point, my mum did flirt with church a wee bit later on, so there was a period of time where we did start actually going to church once a week, **[00:50:00]** which I actually didn't really mind that much, maybe because we were kind of like, bribed into going [laughs], you know, so you'd go to church and then you'd go to like, the little Sunday school thing in the community centre afterwards where you'd get free squash and a biscuit and by the time you got home you'd have a Sunday roast waiting for you, so that seemed pretty good, you know, for forty minutes of sitting in a chair, that seemed like quite a nice deal [laughs], but, so I, yeah, I remember the house being blessed, I do remember us fairly intermittently going to church, but–

FR: Would your dad have gone as well?

PO: Yeah, yeah, he went along I think, I mean, I think, I think he was a born atheist really, my dad, but he appreciated that it might have been of some importance to my mum, and my mum has still got some semblance of, not, definitely not faith, in the way in which somebody who is a committed Christian would talk about their faith, the struggles of their faith, how their faith is built, on what foundations it rests, the kind of, she wouldn't think about it in those terms, but she does entertain the idea of there being the magical or the supernatural or the other, you know, the divine, and I don't think that my dad ever had that, but he would've known that it was important to my mum perhaps to go and that socially it was maybe quite a nice thing to do, you know, you see other people in the community and neighbours and stuff, so we went a bit, but we went through school anyway, so we would've gone for mass once a week as a class to the church, which was a few minutes' walk down the road, or we'd have had mass in the school, so the priest would have come with his little mobile church and set up, set up shop in the school hall, and I honestly have no idea now what I thought of religious notions then, other than the fact that I quite enjoyed the ritualistic aspects of it and I enjoyed the stories and the singing, and I didn't really, I don't think I had strong feelings one way or the other, but I remember something quite remarkable, which was when I was, when I was about, I must've been younger than

eleven, but I don't really know how old I was, a kid in the class didn't have his head bowed in prayer during assembly and the headmaster, who otherwise was a really nice man, said why don't, why aren't you praying, and this kid, who can't have been any older than I was, said well, because I don't believe in God, and I, thinking about it now like, that's quite a kind of incredible thing for that kid to have done really, surrounded by his, you know, like, a hundred kids.

FR: Really quite young.

PO: Young, and a, like, a line of teachers, you know, to just come out with it like that and he was, he was like, shouted at, you know. Thinking about it now obviously I think, you know, what worse reaction could you have, could you have performed in the face of a young person exhibiting freedom of thought [laughs] and intellectual clarity, but then, it was just, it was just sort of slight shock that he'd done it and also maybe a slightly kind of like, well, I wouldn't have said that [laughs].

FR: Yeah, the kind of–

PO: Like, come on mate [laughs], what're you doing, you're making it harder for the rest of us sort of thing, you know, so I don't know, I don't really think that I had, I think, it kind of suggests to me that I took it with a pinch of salt, that I just could enjoy it, maybe a little bit like Irishness as well, something you could dip your toe in, and dip in and out, it's not really actually, it's not real, is it, but it's, it feels real and it's quite exciting and it's obviously important, but it's not important in the way that maybe they think it is, but I enjoyed it as well.

FR: It's interesting also that it allows you to have this connection with Irishness and sort of second-generation Irishness, so there's kind of like, Barry Lagan and so on.

PO: Yeah, there's like, the cultural aspect of it in which it's like, it's nice, it's familiar, you know, it's, and as well what's been through my like, through getting to know and like, my relationship with Agnieszka, is the reminder of the kind of the international aspect of Catholicism as well, which is, in itself, you know, that transgresses geographical boundaries and the first thing that struck me about going to my, my partner's family home back in a small village in central Poland, her mum's house, is how much it reminded me of going to my auntie Lily's house just outside Enniskillen, you know, it's like this, the, for a start like, the Poles seems to share an obsession with single-storey buildings in rural locations [laughs], you know, so they don't call them bungalows there, but like, that, the scale of the house like, the layout, the kind of hospitality like, the fact you're constantly being offered food like, there's a mountain of sandwiches and buttermilk, and church is a big deal, there's lots of religious imagery, attitu-, cultural attitudes, the way that people talk to each other like, the directness, different, completely different sense of what is and isn't polite, which is also very similar, you know, between like, there's a difference, for example, sorry, it's similar between I think Polish Catholic and Irish Catholic culture, maybe.

FR: Different, different from England–

PO: To England.

FR: Especially I suppose, we're talking about Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire.

PO: It seems like it, I mean, the things that, you know, that people would say or the kind of things that they'd come out with or, I don't know, it's so hard to pin these things down and as soon as you begin to try you realise that maybe you're making unsubstantiated cultural claims and that's tricky, but there seems to be something there.

FR: It's about a sense or a feeling.

PO: It's about a feeling, just the ways that people would say things like, the way that her mum might be, you know, she might busy herself around the house, or she might say something a little bit strict and talk to Agnieszka like she's a little girl or, you know, it reminds me so much of things that my mum would say or like, you know, like, she'd empty biscuits into a tin when she's just come back from the shop and saying to us, you know, I have them counted [laughs], you know, things like that, that seems to me like the most Irish sentence I can imagine.

FR: I know [laughs] what you mean, actually.

PO: Something about it, I don't know, and, but it's that that also seems to be there in Agnieszka's upbringing as well and, so yeah, I think that, it's like, there seemed to be these almost like, networks of understanding the world around you which overlap and it seems to be a bit about Irishness, a bit about Catholicism, but it's not essential to either of those things because they, those things can clearly also operate, you know, as, through my adult experience of a relationship with a Polish woman and, you know, so they, they, they're hard to define, but they feel very, very important.

FR: That's really interesting, a kind of transnational Catholic–

PO: Yeah, yeah.

FR: Structure of feeling [laughs] I suppose. So I'm going back to sort of chronology again, I'm sorry, we're going to kind of keep jumping away from it, but just to get through it, so Catholic primary school.

PO: Yeah.

FR: And then, secondary school.

PO: Then secondary school in '93, which was non-denominational, so there was no, and in fact, not really, it wasn't a faith school at all really, there wasn't any mention in assemblies of God, didn't go to mass, **[01:00:00]** and I think that the thing I actually most prominently remember about assemblies at that school was that different like, senior teaching staff would take turns to do it, and that I always really looked forward to a particular teacher whose na-, I still remember, he was called Mr Walton, his assemblies were really nice,

because he would always start his assemblies by playing a piece of music which he would blast out of the quite, actually pretty good school hall PA, and then he would talk about the ideas that the music presented and offer I guess, although I can't really remember vividly what they were, some kind of moral or ethical instruction, but one that was not based in religious faith, but I remember him playing 'Fanfare for the Common Man' like, really loud and that being really, I found that really exciting, really kind of inspiring experience, and then obviously me being the way I was I'd turn round to people and be like, oh that was really exciting wasn't it, that was really good, and they'd be like, they just didn't get it like, that, I was like, really excited by this kind of modern classical [laughs], yeah, so, and that school was, it was okay, I think it was a bit rough. I was bullied a bit, but I don't think that was anything to do, I think that was more to do with me liking modern classical [laughs] and things like that than it was to do with Irishness or my apparent cultural difference, because I think by that point maybe those things weren't that very, weren't that obvious anyway, and certainly I think at the time in the face of any sort of, any kind of bullying or teasing on the basis of those aspects, that probably I would've I think made efforts to conceal it anyway I think. So I think maybe those things were, I did suppress those things maybe a little bit in that period of my life like, up until I reached sixth form, which is kind of when most people, even if they've had a shit time of it before that, realise that they're going to be alright, they've survived, you know, nobody, no matter how nasty some of the kids might've been, the existential threat was an illusion, you know, the fact you were never actually going to be killed by anybody, even if they, even if you were repeatedly told, I'm going to kill, I'm going to kill you, you know, or you realise that, okay, that didn't happen and those people now have gone, and actually when you see them in town they don't look very happy and it doesn't look like they're going to do that well, and you don't gain any pleasure from that realisation, that's quite depressing, and you think okay, it's going to be alright.

FR: But that sense of hierarchy or something that you have maybe when you're twelve or fourteen kind of disappears.

PO: It disappears, or you think that there might actually after all have been a different hierarchy at work all along, of which you were a beneficiary, and you have to come to terms with that, which was the, even though the physical threat seemed all-important for those four or five years, it was never enough to overturn the advantages of coming from a kind of, a comfortably-off, well-educated background and being loved, you know, and liked by your family and so on, you know, so that really you've kind of been winning all along, even if it feels like you've been suffering, you know, and that those people aren't really, they haven't got a great, they haven't got a kind of a great prospect ahead of them maybe in some cases. I mean, obviously there are quite extreme cases like, I remember one, one kid was famous for, cos he, you know, he did actually go to prison and stuff, there's always, there's going to be one, isn't there, at least. But that school was alright I think, I don't know, I think I felt uncomfortable for most of it, I think, and I always thought maybe it was, for a long time I thought it was because the sheer like, niceness of my family life didn't really prepare me for the lack of niceness that I'd come across as an older kid in a bigger school, bigger community, whereas more apparent threats or people who just don't like you for no reason or, I don't think I was really prepared for that, just because I'd had I think quite a lovely, sheltered upbringing in many ways, wasn't really exposed to anything particularly uncomfortable, you know, so, which is a pretty common experience I think, and I think that I

also always really, really enjoyed studying, so like, I got excited in September, I remember really, really tangibly how excited I was when I got my first piece of English homework, for example, that would, you know, which I remember in one year was to draw an illustration of your favourite section from *Dracula*, which, I was just like, this is, this is brilliant, this beats algebra, but also beats kind of anything else like, I would take so much pleasure in doing that and I think my eagerness and keenness didn't really do me any favours socially at school as well, and also my, wasn't just like to get things done or to do well, it was, I liked like, I really loved drama when I was at school and I think I liked that because I liked expressing myself, I liked the idea that you could explore through it, and I think that's something that lots of people, and particularly awkward kind of just pre-teen or teenage people, are a bit uncomfortable with, which is fair enough, but I, I really enjoyed getting up in front of people and like, trying on a different identity or, we, our school had like, had a really good separate drama studio as well as the school hall, which is where the plays were put on, and from the first year I wanted to be in them, they were like extra-curricular, you know, it was outside school, so you were, it was like drama club, you know, and the first year we did this probably like, barbarically edited-down version of *Henry V* and then the next year it was, what was it, first year was *Henry V*, my third year at secondary school it was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which I really, really enjoyed, and I played Bottom and I really enjoyed that, that was good fun, and then in the like, amazingly now, thinking about it, in the fourth year, so year ten, so what's that like, fifteen, me and another kid shared the part of Macbeth in a school play, but we like, we put on, the idea of like, fifteen-year-olds putting on *Macbeth* at a school and even knowing half the part, from memory, I find like, really remarkable now, just as I find remarkable the fact that I could write, without notes like, an essay, a structured essay in an examination in English lit and stuff, I find that like, amazing now, I don't know if I could do it as an adult.

FR: With no laptop to check the–

PO: Yeah, yeah, it's really odd. So I really loved, I loved that, I loved learning the lines, I loved getting my intonation perfectly right, I loved trying to convey something to people, but I also really, really loved this weird sensation that you get when you're in front of people acting, which is of being, assuming more than one identity at the same time, so you are, **[01:10:00]** it's, you're completely exposed like, in one sense, so it's, it's like you're naked, you're standing naked in a room full of people who can't see, in a way, you are completely exposed in one level and yet that exposure is partially concealed by the assumption of another identity and that kind of, the tension that you get from that of being incredibly vulnerable and yet commanding people's attention, I thought was really exciting and I always really, really enjoyed it.

FR: It kind of makes sense I suppose in terms of what we talked about before, the fluidity of identity, that having a kind of part-Irish, part-British, part-Home Counties kind of persona.

PO: Yeah, and I think that, I was, I mean, I was really interested in language as well and the idea that, that what you, that what you say can kind of, what you say and what you do, how you perform, can convey something very powerful to people, but can invoke in others something as well, that you can kind of summon up a feeling through acting in a particular way, and that there's a perform-, there's a, that's true of performance in terms of acting,

but it's also, there is a performative aspect to all behaviour, and that I was I think aware of that even then really, that there was something interesting going on in terms of the reality of who or what you are that is explored through performing in front of people, you know, that when we, you know, when we talk about truth in terms of identity, we're talking about something a lot more slippery than a lot of the time people realise, you know, the truth of what you are and who you are and how that is constituted, and I also remember, however, being in a play that I now think was probably really terrible, which was, sadly, written by a very nice lady who was the wife of Mr Walton, who's Coral Walton, who was a local playwright and I think she worked really hard at her plays and has maybe before or since written things which are really like, great works of dramatic fiction, but I think now in retrospect that it wasn't, it wasn't that great a play, but she was, she was writing about, basically it was about the political, it was about the peace process, it was about Northern Ireland, which is really interesting, but, and it'll be interesting to see what your reaction is to this, but it was, she was basically, it was a rendering of the complexities of the political peace process in Northern Ireland through the metaphorical framework of *Alice in Wonderland*, and it was called *No Wonderland*, and the various protagonists in the peace process in Northern Ireland were equated with politicians and cultural figures in Northern Ireland, so the Mock Turtle was Mock Trimble and it, to my shame, that's the part that I played, and I think have wiped most of this from my memory. I remember seeing my brother's face after the play and he was, it was one of dismay, I think he was just being a little bit more politically astu-, a lot more politically astute than I was at the time, and maybe slightly more, maybe more sort of, in some ways more sensitive, was just like, that was, he just said that was, that was abysmal, he didn't even try and sugar-coat it, he was just like, that was, that was terrible, he was angry, he was angry about how it had treated the issues.

FR: Did he feel like it had trivialised it, you think, or–?

PO: Absolutely, yeah, and I think that it had unintentionally done so, I think it was, but I think also maybe there were sort of slightly more questionable notions of cultural licence as well, you know, like, who was this sort of middle-class English woman to think that she could make a play about this and cast predominantly English school children in these parts, which were intended to represent political figures that they didn't really understand, and it was, you know, it was mawkish as well, you know, sentimental where it shouldn't have been and, so it was, yeah, it was pretty awful I think.

FR: It's so interesting though that that, it's obviously in the culture, in the air, the peace process, Northern Ireland is something that's like, visible at that moment in England even.

PO: It is really interesting and I think that, and I think that, I have no idea now really of ascertaining to what degree that was rare or unusual, but even the fact that it was done at a kind of commu-, at a local theatre, quite a good theatre in Welwyn Garden City at that time, you know, so far removed in many ways, spatially and culturally, from, you know, the source of the events that it was depicting is pretty, it's pretty remarkable really.

FR: It's actually just made me think of something that we haven't talked about, before we maybe move onto your later life, but, so if you're at school in Welwyn Garden City in '98

when the peace process happens, do you have any memories of, say, the IRA bombings in London, which are not that much before then, and my geography of the Home Counties is somewhat shaky, but I suppose you're not that far away from London, right?

PO: No, so only, only, so like the bombings that took place in like, the–

FR: Early to mid-nineties.

PO: Yeah, the early to mid-nineties and those earlier ones that took place in the late eighties, my memory of those is actually kind of quite vague, which is odd maybe, I don't know, but TV footage of the like, the remnants of a bombed-out building. My inner sense of the events that affected my parents is more vivid than the ones that took place during my own lifetime.

FR: That's interesting.

PO: I remember my dad telling me about seeing the [pauses], the Belfast station explosion from a pub and in his memory he was, he was like, it was like he saw the whole roof lift before it shattered, and whether or not that was true, he himself at the time was kind of quite, he was quite, you know, he, he was a very intelligent man, so he, he I think quite astutely had like, a reflexive, is the word, the right word maybe, attitude to his own memory, so he was like, I don't know if this is constructed or whatever, but I seem to remember the whole roof going up in the air before it shattered and then came down and he rem-, you know, there was a, there was a young woman screaming and he, either he, I can't remember, or somebody there, who was probably a bit drunk or at least like, mellow was just, you know, saying och give over, you know, it's alright like, mad isn't it, like, just really, just like, it's alright, it's okay, that kind of like, yeah, and that, I found that really, really weird, and my mum remembers Black, Black Friday, yeah, or Bloody Friday.

FR: Black Friday.

PO: [pauses] She called it Black, she used to call it Black Friday or Bloody Friday, Black Friday, I don't know–

FR: I think, yeah, I think it's called both in Northern Ireland.

PO: Yeah, but she remembers that, and she remembers that it, you know, I can't remember now the total number of explosive devices that went off on that day, **[01:20:00]** but it was in hundreds, wasn't it?

FR: Yeah, I think so.

PO: And she remembers that and just how, I mean, she, the ways she talks about it is just ridiculously prosaic, you know, she's like, you didn't know whether, she was like, you didn't know whether you were going to be able to get to work [laughs], you didn't know whether the buses were running and I guess, but that's just the way that people experience those things I guess, and it's just that, but that seemed again just that really odd juxtaposition of

the mundane and the frighteningly weird and shocking in that memory, and I can't remember which specific explosion it was or attack it was, but she remembers seeing, as she put it, bits of people being put into bags, you know, which I found shocking when I was a kid, but only really I think visualised maybe more fully as the years went by, you know, it seemed like a really abstract thing, bits of people could have been, that just sounds like ideas, you know, not real things, not real material, just bits of people, just kind of sounds pretty mundane, you know, but later on I was like, oh okay, so she might have seen, for example, a bit of a hand or something semi-recognisable being put in a bag, you know, and it was only really in probably my twenties that I was like, that's really, that's a terrible, terrible thing to have seen, and beyond, genuinely beyond my comprehension what it would be like to have seen something like that, and how that might change you in different ways, and what you might have to do to make sense of having seen something like that, you know, what processes you might have to go through internally to try and make sense of it. So all of that, that kind of second-hand knowledge is, for reasons I think are quite understandable, but I won't go into because it's, you know, I don't know, I don't necessarily want to talk about it from a, maybe from like, a theoretical point of view, but I think it makes sense that they're more vivid to me, for how they, for how I, for how they were received, for how, for the circumstances in which I consumed those accounts.

FR: I mean, I, I find it interesting that your parents would have talked to you about it directly, just as we said before we started recording, or I said before we started recording that my parents never talked to me about the Troubles or anything like that.

PO: Yeah, and I don't know why that, I don't know why they did like, or literally, I don't know if it was because they volunteered it or because I asked like, I can't remember, but I know that for a lot of my life I've not been, I've been actually pretty incurious, as we were saying before we started, about their experiences and then it's been in more recent years, where I've kind of felt slightly ashamed of that in some ways, that I've asked them more about their experiences, and I talked to my dad about it quite a lot when he was seriously ill, so in like, the year leading up to his death a few years ago of cancer I did make a point of asking him a bit more about his early life and things like that, didn't record any of it, I wasn't that organised, but at least I wanted to talk to him about it and get a sense of what those experiences were like and how he felt about that. But the, so the more recent bombings I remember only really because [pauses], because of their appearance in the press really, you know, through TV. I don't remember even strong reactions from my parents to those things, I think any reaction would probably have been like, again, quite, as I was sort of suggesting earlier, I think quite dismissive like, they're killing each other again over there or, you know, why can't they just get their act together like, my dad was just like, he was just like, the Northern Irish have got a chip on their shoulder, that was just his, he was just like, they just need to sort it out, wasn't, he didn't have any kind of, he would've been absolutely useless in a political negotiation [laughs] because I don't think he thought that the situation could kind of any longer be explained by the transgressions of the past primarily, as far as he was concerned, that the kind of like, the engine for it was something else, which was the contemporary politics of the place and what people in positions of power had to gain or lose from particular forms of conflict, for example, and particular communities being divided and less powerful, which in itself is I think fairly actually pretty astute, to be honest, and corresponded to, you know, a lot of the conclusions that I myself drew when I, you know,

when I read like, sociology on the region, you know, which is quite interesting, whilst trying to avoid a, you know, the reductive conclusion that it's just economic or, you know, that it's just an economic conflict like, all conflicts are economic or whatever, you know, it's, but I think that there wasn't really any, I think for, I realise now maybe, for something to appear tragic there has to be a sense that there is some semblance of purpose behind the act and if you see it as senseless then it can't accordingly be tragic. Tragedy implies a sense of destiny, a sense of kind of conflict on the grounds of romantic principles, and I don't think–

FR: A sense of desire I guess, anyway.

PO: Yeah, yeah.

FR: Yeah, so I'm thinking, so after you left school what did you do?

PO: So I went to, I went to art college and I really loved it. I didn't really know when I started my A-levels what I wanted to do and I think I would've really enjoyed like, a degree in history or English lit or, but I know that I settled on, settled on like, being a painter, back then anyway, partly maybe cos it was something that my brother hadn't tried to do yet, or that my older brother hadn't kind of staked out territory in that area, so I was like, okay, I'll do that one, of the things I can do, I'll do that one, and I really threw myself into it I think, worked really hard, the year that I, you have to do a foundation year before your degree and that year I think I just drew, I basically drew and painted pretty obsessively and really loved it. I would work, I'd do a full day at college during the day and then I'd come home and I'd paint in the evening in my room, all evening. I was like, this is what I have to do, but also this is, I was like, this is what I should be doing, it was like, as soon as I got there I had an immediate sense of my, of the necessity of me improving at what I was doing and I had really good tutors and I think that they really, **[01:30:00]** something happened when I was at art college that really opened my eyes to different ways of seeing the world that I'd not appreciated before, particularly in terms of the difference between the appearance of objects and what they might actually really be, or trying to assume, or the dangers of assuming too much about the world, and that came about through looking at it a lot, you know, so actually painting and drawing from observation, and I remember being really, really excited the first time that I realised that I could see colour in a new way, in the way that I had read about before, in artists' letters, for example, so like, or the way in which at the time like, superior or more experience painting students that I knew were talking about it, and that first time that I kind of looked at something and realised that it wasn't just black, for example, you know, that in order to construct some kind of visual equivalent to that object on a flat surface you would clearly require more than a tube of black paint, was really, really exciting, because then that, the necessity of constructing something through more complex means for the painted surface makes you, forces the realisation that there is greater complexity in what you're observing than you previously assumed, and so black objects become objects that contain pink or blue or viridian, and the same is true of clouds or the sea or, then, when you come and look at a landscape more generally you start to suspect that you can see the colour spectrum itself kind of working, which is really, really exciting, and I think that those sorts of thoughts preoccupied me really completely for that earlier part of my like, art education, and then I went to Falmouth in Cornwall and did my degree there and that was really lovely, and I painted in quite a different way there, I wasn't

really painting from life or whatever, but those things still interested me very much like, you know, visual perception and the complexities of it, and I think, perhaps because I became really preoccupied with those things, I didn't really think about, in that time in my life, cultural identity or, or I was in a place that was completely sort of safe in that regard, you know, in that I was absolutely, you know, the least notable individual in a room of fine art students, you know, and so that was quite nice, you know, you know, I mean, I, you know, if you grow up in like, suburban Hertfordshire, you know, there's a lot of things that you're not going to come across, you know. I mean, I didn't meet anybody who was like, openly gay or transgender until I went to university, you know, and I think that those things were really like, they were formative or reformative experiences in a way, you know, sense of what it means to be different, it's completely kind of recalibrated because, you know, you're coming across things which are kind of genuinely way outside your previous experience, and so kind of any claims for alterity you might have yourself suddenly are put into this very, very different scale of experience and you realise maybe that, you know, where you might have kind of naively and unjustifiably claimed marginalisation you can't anymore, you know, it doesn't stack up in the face of what you have now come across, and that process has only continued really since then I think, and especially living in Brighton as well. But the subject of Irishness rather than Englishness has still been there throughout that period, and I think that that has kind of often come about as a result of my like, my relationships with other people, so like, my intimate relationships with people, where they have been aware that they are with somebody who is not English, and I've obviously been aware of it, and they have been always English until my relationship with Agnieszka, in which the subject of my Irishness has come up again in a different way, in a really nice way, you know, in a way in which she had said like, the fact that when she found out that I was from Belfast she said that that was, that added to my attraction [laughs], which is funny, cos with other people it would be completely the opposite.

FR: Well, so I guess that's what I going to ask, so how, in what way was that a factor in previous relationships with English people?

PO: So I remember, my, so my, I met my previous partner at Falmouth in like, the first term of the first year of my degree, and we were together until 2015–

FR: Wow, wow.

PO: So we were together for a really long time and [pauses] the, the most explicit example of it I'd say is where we went to visit my family in Northern Ireland, my auntie Lily, with the family like, we went on a family holi- like, our first family holiday for years, I'm not sure why actually, that's interesting, but it was our first holiday to Ireland together as a family for years and my partner came with us and we were actually staying in Donegal, but we travelled through Northern Ireland in the car and through Fermanagh, where Lily was, and then over into the South, the Republic, the Republic, that's in the North, into Donegal, and she said that her, she was positively, in a positive sense, amazed at how different it felt being in auntie Lily's house and, in a kind of interesting parallel to what I was talking about earlier in terms of the relationship between Polish and Irish culture, or at least Polish Catholic culture and Irish Catholic culture, her, she said the thing that it reminded her of most at the time was going to her old school friend's house for Christmas, whose family

were Polish, so her going to Polish Christmas eve, *Wigilia*, with her, at her friend Jenny's house, where Jenny's like, *babcia* was and, you know, like, her grandparents, and she was like, it's as different, she was like, it's as different to my experience as going to a Polish-English family's house in just, in a way that wasn't that easy to define, but is to do with people's manner of speech like, the symbols that surround you, like the, **[01:40:00]** the décor, the way people talk about things, all of these things were completely different to her background, which was, she came from a kind of a really like, cosy middle-class Gloucestershire background and, you know, surrounded by the kind of landscape that British patriots get misty-eyed about, you know, it's like the landscape of Vaughan Williams's music, it's like, and her experience, and we, you know, we talked about it, that our experiences, our upbringings were really, really different, and an aspect of that was cultural, but it wasn't, couldn't entirely be explained in those terms and obviously we were wise enough to realise that it couldn't be, it wasn't just like, oh it's because you're English and because I'm, I'm sort of Irish, it wasn't to do, just like that, but it was there, it was apparent, and it would come up a lot when there'd be conversations about, when people would say we, about, meaning the English, and I'd be like, that's, but that's not me, you know, I would be like, oh well, I'm not actually included in that, you know, and that, it was like, we don't really like that here, do we, and I was like, well, I don't know.

FR: Am I part of the we or am I not part of the we?

PO: Am I part, I don't know, yeah, I'm not, I'm not sure if I'm included in that, or, or I'd meet people and they'd, you know, they'd refer to me as an Englishman and I'd, I'd bristle, but I wouldn't really know exactly why, not that, you know, somebody from Iceland should be, or Denmark, should be expected to discern the difference between, you know, my mannerisms and that of an Englishman, whatever they might be, you know, it's like, but that's always persisted and then more recently with Agnieszka she, she is conscious of my Irishness and likes it, in a sense that's partly personal because she kind of, she likes what she perceives of the culture. She loves the, she loves Northern Irish accents, you know, when she hears them. She has come to England with a Polish person's idea of the difference between the English and the Irish, the Irish being preferable [laughs].

FR: The Irish being warmer or more–?

PO: Warmer, more wel-, yeah, more, so like, warmer, more welcoming, more helpful, more musical, better dancers [laughs], all of that stuff, all the stuff that you usually hear, but also ultimately, you know, not, not descended from the architects of a brutal international colonialist empire, which is part of it, you know, so, and I think that in Poland as well like, the national myth of Poland is very much tied up with the notion of martyrdom, the Polish national anthem, or the unofficial national anthem, which is sung at like, sporting occasions and not just like, sports tournaments, but other things as well, is a sentiment of which, and I think even the lyrics of which are essentially, Poland is still here, so there's that sense of a country which has been subject to invasions, exploitation, which has literally disappeared from the map and reappeared, whilst other people have redrawn geographical and political boundaries, and a sense of like, a culture that has continually had to tragically reassert itself, and I think that there is kind of like, an identification there, which I can't comment on, but I find really interesting.

FR: Yeah, no, I can see the, I can see a kind of resonance or an affinity there for sure.

PO: And I think you see similar things between, you know, as people here have touched on in their research between like, Basque communities and Northern Ireland, for example, and, you know, it's, I don't think it's any surprise that in certain parts of Spain *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* went down really, really well, you know, that played in big cinemas over there, people really loved it, you know, and I think that people do, they kind of seek out those similarities, and I think that when I met their, when I met her family it was interesting, because a lot of things would be, by me, jokingly put down to my Irishness, so like, you know, I'd be asked do I want any more potatoes and I'd say well, of course I do, I'm an Irishman, you know, just as a joke, just to make them joke, but then it's like, you realise that you're mobilising these stereotypical Irish attributes because you feel entitled to, to kind of make someone laugh or make somebody feel more comfortable or kind of tell them something about yourself or whatever, and I was teased because, you know, the phrase that I said most often, you know, in that first visit was *Jestem Irlandczyk* which is like, I'm an Irishman, you know, so it became an explanation for things I was doing, rather than just a statement of national identity it was like, well, yeah, yeah, of course I'm struggling in the hot weather, you know, I'm an Irishman, you know, it's like, and it has another function, which is to kind of make you feel more comfortable in your own skin in an unusual scenario, you know, so you're like, well, I'm surrounded by difference, so I'll kind of, I'll focus on the thing that makes me feel grounded.

FR: Yeah, that makes sense. So I wondered maybe just in coming towards an end, it's interesting cos it, as you say, while you were at art school in Cornwall and afterwards, although the kind of sense of difference or alterity or something is still sort of there, it's also sort of in abeyance to some extent, and it seems to me, and again I'm partly relying on stuff outside of the tape here, so obviously I know you did the MA at Brighton [laughs], but it seems as if at some point you kind of become interested in Northern Ireland again, in the history of Northern Ireland, in–?

PO: Yeah, so I think that, that happens really for various reasons, one of which is my like, my dad, my mum and dad separate and my dad remarries, and he marries an English woman, and this is like, years back, and she comes from, well, she, when they meet, lives in a, you know, a very, what appears to me a very grand, large, redbrick early twentieth-century suburban townhouse in Surrey, and her children, her daughters go to the local grammar school and to me speak like minor royals, and their, and my relationship with that, with his kind of new family, you know, over the years is kind of quite, actually quite strained for personal reasons, but also reasons that I think now I put down to my, maybe my culturally informed sense of the situation, you know, the idea that [pauses] because of the, because of the kind of maybe completely, maybe I'm just like, understandable preferences of his new partner, the significance or importance of his earlier life is downplayed, of which I, but also Ireland, are a part, you know, and so his Irishness and our Irishness, as like, new **[01:50:00]** stepbrothers and sisters and [pauses], and him as like, a new partner, they're kind of, they are talked about, but in a kind of joking way or in a way that I feel kind of like, trivialises and simplifies it, so I'm kind of made more aware of it then, and I do think, I do like, I think about it a lot more.

FR: So what sort of age are you here?

PO: So that's around the time, so he, I first like, met Sue, his new wife and now his widow, in the year that I start art school, and my younger sister who, born in England in like, 1987, and I think generally just a less combative person than me or my brother like, she got on from the start better or seemingly better, it's obviously going to be more complicated than I assume, but with, with Sue and with her kids and [pauses], but it, I don't know, it kind of, it comes up again in a way that I think is maybe actually slightly more difficult to talk about, because it's kind of grounded in maybe more personal issues or problems, but I think ironically the reason, you know, that I found myself looking again at the history and culture of Northern Ireland through the MA here, but what actually led me to want to take the master's course was not that element of the studies at all, it was actually reading like, by huge contrast, Svetlana Alexievich's *Second-hand Time.*

FR: Ah amazing book.

PO: Yeah, so it was reading that and having visited Berlin and kind of developed an interest in like, Cold War-era cultural identities and the post-Soviet era in Europe, and it was actually those things, which actually got kind of fairly like, relegated position in my field of interests now, but that's what drew me to do the course and I entirely anticipated myself writing about Alexievich's work like, on my MA, I was like, I'm going to, I want to write about that, and then when I came to, you know, I was with Agnieszka when I was applying for the course and she was like, you know, and that was around the time, you know, of like, resurgent political and populist nationalism and she was like, I think it's really important what you're doing, you know, like, taking this course and investigating these things because they're going to be increasingly, sadly, increasingly necessary to think about and deal with in the years ahead, that's what it felt like, and then ended up being interested in the digital mediation of death and dying [laughs], you know, you just don't know which direction you're going to go in really, so Northern Irish cultural identity did come up again, it kind of, it came back and it was, I loved studying that specific module, I loved writing about it and I did enjoy coming to it as a, as a Northern Irish person, I found that really interesting, not least because I could wind people up by jokingly saying things that were incredibly inappropriate.

FR: But that you're allowed to say [laughs].

PO: But that I'm allowed to say, which is, you know, one of the few benefits of coming from Northern Ireland in the first place. So like, I could arrive at a seminar, for example, and say I don't know if I understood the readings, but it basically comes down to Catholic good, Protestant bad, right, and just to see what people would say and how they'd react and see whether or not people would kind of be able to tell that I was just completely taking the piss or not, which is maybe even as somebody from Northern Ireland a really stupid thing to say, but no, but I think, unfortunately I've like, inherited a certain degree of my dad's tactlessness, so I just couldn't help myself.

FR: And kind of frustration or cynicism or whatever as well, right?

PO: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I, obviously the kind of tried and tested technique for dealing with culturally and personally difficult topics, which is to simplify them through humour, which is what everybody does.

FR: Yeah, and to joke about them, which is what people in Northern Ireland do really when they talk about the past.

PO: Yeah, exactly, I mean, look at, I mean, I watched, I think it was back in like, October I watched *Derry Girls* for the first time and I was like, this is, I was like, this is great, and it would've been impossible to make any time other than now, which is interesting in itself, but I loved the way that that completely demolished any sense of like, propriety in terms of how you talk about those issues. I really enjoyed it and that was, and that was entirely through the like, really sensible kind of device of looking at the conflict through teenagers' eyes, in which they will brutally simplify things which adults have unnecessarily overcomplicated in many ways, you know.

FR: Yeah, that's a good way to think about it actually.

PO: So it's just like, well, yeah, but it's not that, is it, it's just this, it's, you know.

FR: This is what it is.

PO: This is what it is really, isn't it, you say it's about that, but it's not really, is it, and also the really poignant way in which they just think where they live is absolutely amazing, you know, like when they–

FR: Yeah, they love Derry, yeah.

PO: They love Derry, and when they get visits from foreign exchange students from like, I think is it Belarus or, and they just expect them to be amazed at how wonderful Derry is, because they come from this place of savagery and they're just like, this place is a dump, you know.

FR: I think people from Derry are like that [laughs], in my experience.

PO: They love Derry.

FR: More than anywhere else in Northern Ireland, people from Derry are really attached.

PO: Proud of Derry.

FR: Proud of Derry, yeah, probably for, you know, real historical, material reasons.

PO: Yeah, well, it makes sense I guess, especially if it's, it seems to make sense in accordance with, I mean, maybe this is just too pat, I don't know, too simplistic, but it seems to make sense in terms of its like, divided status–

FR: Sure.

PO: That consolidating a sense of it as a place is more important.

FR: Depending where you–

PO: Where you are, yeah.

FR: So I think, sort of final questions, we talked a little bit earlier about Brexit and how you now might want to have an Irish passport.

PO: Yeah.

FR: And I guess that, I mean, there's kind of two questions, there's the legal question or the practical question of having an Irish passport is obviously useful in the context of Brexit, but there's a kind of more existential, or a question about how you understand yourself, as Irish, as British, if that's changed or if, yeah, I don't know.

PO: Yeah, I mean, it's like, am I more Irish now because I have one, you know, it's–

FR: Yeah, sure [laughs], which is kind of silly like.

PO: But, but it's, I think maybe that is a bit crudely reductive, but it's kind of what it, that's the question really, isn't it, it's like, has it sort of, you know, does attaining one actually kind of transform you in any significant way or does it feel like it has, and I think that there is, there is a part of me which is really resistant to that idea. It feels like it, it's going to be a kind of a further development in this maybe, perhaps ambivalence in me as to what I am, which I am, in the sense that I'll happily use whichever passport will make any given scenario easier, which is kind of what I've done up until now, just not with physical documents, but with the way that I act or the way that I behave and they're just, they manifest it in some way, but it's just an extension of that process, and I don't think anything could maybe underscore that **[02:00:00]** ambivalence any more clearly than the fact that I'm not acquiring one so I can live in Ireland.

FR: Yeah, sure.

PO: I don't have any intention of living in the Republic.

FR: Or in the North.

PO: Or in the North, no, it would be so that I could move to Gdansk and, you know, learn about my partner's culture and, you know, gain fluency in Polish and that's, that's why I would gain an Irish passport, which negates, you could say just inherently, any sense of their being [pauses], like a, negates completely the idea that the national is primarily the concern, the fact that it's being acquired for purposes of international cultural exploration or whatever, you know, it–

FR: Or Europeanness.

PO: Europeanness, which is, you know, and once you start moving to that level that's a whole other layer of wooliness and vagueness about what these things mean, so it's, and the other thing is as well of course, that it's important to remember, is that it's, I, I'm not doing it through my own like, I haven't instigated the scenario in which I'm doing it, you know.

FR: I see, I see what you mean.

PO: Like, I'm doing it because, because other people have made a decision, it's not–

FR: It's an enforced–

PO: Yeah, I haven't done it because of a kind of explosion of Irish patriotism [laughs] or something, it's because a, it's a bureaucratic decision, isn't it, or an administrative decision really, which will prevent barriers to me joining my partner wherever she chooses to go in the European continent. The further, more unsettling question is what would happen when we, if we tried to come back, cos I'd have citizenship, but she only has settled status, so it's whether or not that would survive any protracted period in Poland, that's more my concern.

FR: My partner and I have the same dilemma, actually exactly the same.

PO: Yeah, it's like, you might want to go though, cos obviously I want to go there and, you know, her mum's not getting any younger and I want to go to, I feel personally like, personally it's necessary for me to live in Poland like, I want to, at some point, but it's just whether or not we could come back, you know, which is, yeah, and the Irish passport's not much use then.

FR: No.

PO: It doesn't do her any good, so it's, yeah.

FR: It's tricky.

PO: Yeah.

FR: Do you still have any family in the North?

PO: Yeah, but, I mean, nobody, nobody with whom I have like, close ties, so like, cousins and cousins of my parents and great-uncles and aunts, and people who I, kind of they, they're slightly vague to me as, you know, as people, but yeah, there are still family there, but what's, I guess what's weird is that I don't, they are all there, you know, so my family here is my brother and my sister and my mum now, and obviously her new husband and my stepfamily, with whom sadly I'm not talking at the moment, but [pauses], so, the, you know, what constitutes family is very small, because they're all there and whether or not they're,

the degree to which they're separated geographically has a bearing on the degree to which they're not present in my life, I'm not sure, cos I think there might be people, for example, who have extended family in the country in which they live with whom they don't really engage, I don't know. But I think there's still the sense that, slightly kind of melancholy sense that that's where everything is, you know, and that it's not, but it's not known or understood or visited.

FR: Yeah, it goes back to this, that thing you said at the start about being told that you're from somewhere and the kind of unsettling sense of well, how can I be from there when I don't know anything.

PO: Yeah, and who would I go to like, if I went there now and, you know, what, it's almost like, going there and meeting this, these members of my family with whom I don't have what you could justifiably call a relationship, trying to build one would in itself maybe be a kind of an unsettling confirmation of the fact that one doesn't exist already, so it's like, and then there's also just like, well, you know, why would I be doing it, or can I construct family by another means, if family's just a kind of a network of people who are significant to you, then does it have to be people who you're tied to by blood, who have certainly not gone out of their way to invite you back, you know, if it's a mutual estrangement, and it's not a question of your commitment or not to a concept of family, then maybe that's some kind of resolution to the, the weird, the apparent weirdness of the, of their absence in your life, but it does feel like an absence which is, yeah, a bit odd.

FR: That, that makes sense. I think that's probably my questions all done. I guess the thing to ask at the end is, is there anything we haven't talked about that you think, or that you thought about, or that you thought we might discuss, or that you remember?

PO: I guess you never talk about things in the way that you might expect or, I hope it's been useful.

FR: No, it's been really useful, really, really useful and really, really interesting.

PO: Yeah, I guess there's so much. There was one thing that came up, I remember when I was thinking about this, when I was talking to my mum, which was about, and it's also connected to my later study of Northern Ireland here [pauses], which is kind of almost like a bridge, you know, between those two parts of it like, the past experience and present reflections on it, which is when I was, I was thinking about, I was thinking about my memories of childhood and memories more generally in a different way in light of my study of cultural memory, and when looking at Alison Landsberg's ideas of prosthetic memory for the first time it prompted me to think in a more explicit and direct way than I had before about the influence of cinematic narrative and cinematic forms, and also the specific content of particular cinematic representations on your memory and how it's constructed, and how you then remember and re-remember your experiences, I think also informed by Alistair Thomson's studies of Anzac memory as well, you know, and his realisation that the veterans that he was speaking to were constructing their memories of the past with help from *Gallipoli*, for example, and I realised that the, in my head, after watching *'71*, something funny was happening to my memories of seeing armed soldiers on the street in

Northern Ireland on childhood holidays, the soldiers at the border crossing, and although they **[02:10:00]** weren't literally kind of morphing into the young English actor, I can't remember his name now, Jack–

FR: I don't know his name, but I know the guy, yeah.

PO: He's great, they weren't morphing into that actor, you know, that performance, it was making, it was entirely kind of reordering the memory for me, and I think in a way that was driven by this kind of reappraisal of those individuals, you know, so this sort of my like, the way in which that film specifically kind of asks you to identify with a very sympathetic representation of a young British solider, kind of instigated in me the realisation that these people who were kind of otherwise faceless symbols of authority could've well been twenty-one-year-old men from the Midlands, you know, scared shitless or bored, wondering why they're there, regretting their decision, but filled with often like, mundane and entirely understandable concerns, and far younger, although they seemed ancient at the time, than I am now, the kind of person who if I met them now I would consider like, a boy, you know.

FR: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PO: A wee boy, and that, that was, that kind of, that was incredible, that sort of going through that process so consciously was really, really interesting and it did make me think differently about the conflict as well I think, cos I hadn't ever really put a huge amount of thought into the, the experience of the young British soldier in Northern Ireland, I'd neglected that, simplified it, so that was, I thought that was really interesting. But the more I talk about it, the more I talk about what I'm not doing with that memory, the more I am kind of putting that actor's face into those roles, so it's like, I wonder, given how little I remember of my mnemonic processes in the past, I wonder what will change in the future and whether or not I'll be sitting in a room talking to somebody, and even my memory of this process will be vague and I'll be talking about those memories in a completely different way, in a way that seems to me entirely true at the time.

FR: It's always, it's always fluid, right?

PO: Yeah.

FR: Alright, well, thank you so much Paul.

PO: That's alright, yeah.

FR: That was really, really interesting, that, I'm always worried–

INTERVIEW ENDS