

# Séamus Nolan Talk, July 10, 2026

## ***The Blackened Circle: Prototype for a Monument***

*The Blackened Circle* is a monument to the temporary possession, occupation, use and enjoyment of land that has been customary for the Irish Traveller community for centuries. In the past, circles of black ash and charred sticks are what remained to mark the campfires that were central to the gathering of nomadic communities along roadsides and networks of traditional camping grounds.

The project involved working collaboratively with Traveller community members to document and share these storied sites, recounting and sustaining the connections to the land and to the communities intersecting those places. This collection joins a number of ongoing mapping projects within Traveller organisations across Ireland, projects that focus on the sharing of collective history and centre the question of Traveller culture and land practices that have existed outside formal recognised relationships of ownership and title.

On Friday the 10th of July (1pm – 2pm) Séamus Nolan was scheduled to speak in conversation with Dr. Rosaleen McDonagh, Traveller, writer, playwright, activist and human rights commissioner, about this project. Unfortunately, Rosaleen was too ill to attend on the day, and had to cancel. However Séamus did a wonderful talk, speaking about his journey and relationship to working with minority cultures, with a Q&A session at the end.

This work is developed with participants through the Traveller Health Project with coordinator Gillian Walsh, Eleanor O'Reilly (Purcell Reilly nee Casey), Mary O'Reilly (The Stars), and Kathleen O'Reilly (nee Delaney). The project has been funded by Creative Ireland and the exhibition delivered as part of STAC's ongoing partnership with Clonmel Junction Arts Festival.

This talk was free.

For ages 18+

**Helena Tobin:** Okay, we are going to make a start, if everyone is okay with that. I'll do a very, very brief introduction, and if people come along, they can obviously take a seat.

So, you all know who I am, the Artistic Director & Curator here at STAC. This conversation was supposed to be between Séamus and (Dr.) Rosaleen McDonagh, but Rosaleen did a book launch in Dublin last night and wasn't feeling very well — I think the heat maybe has gotten to her, as it has to many of us — so she wasn't feeling well this morning, and was unable to make the trip down from Dublin. But we're going to go ahead with the same format anyway, and that is Séamus talking to himself.

*(Laughter)*

We will start with Clíona Maher who we invited to read an excerpt of Rosaleen's most recent book, *Contentious Spaces*, which came out just this April, Spring. It was an excerpt chosen between herself and Séamus, so we thought it was still quite apt and appropriate for the exhibition and for what Séamus will be talking about in terms of the exhibition and his work with the local Traveller community and the Traveller community at large, that this would start proceedings. So, before we get into things, I'm going to hand you over to Clíona to read the excerpt.

*(Clíona Maher reads an excerpt from 'Contentious Spaces' (Skein Press, 2026) by Dr. Rosaleen McDonagh, pages 260 – 266)*

**Séamus Nolan:** Thanks very much Clíona.

So, myself and Rosaleen were talking about what section from a book we might choose. I was thinking along the lines of a piece that maybe looked at issues around — because the book is centred around the suicide and eviction that happen in the same week — and I was looking at, having worked in Oberstown with some of the young Travellers, the issues around inadequate accommodation and planning, and how this is affecting young people and social problems that are occurring because of that lack of opportunities and lack of future planning towards accommodation. Basic accommodation. Where Rosaleen was like, “Hm. No, this is for the women.” And she wanted to — because the contributions from Kathleen and from Ellen and from Mary, informed the text that Rosaleen wrote — and she was like, “No, I want to talk about the relationship between the women and their daughters.”

So, in the book — it's like a series of short stories, it's written from a couple of different perspectives, who all live on the site, and then there's been a suicide — but throughout the book Kate, who we just heard her section, or some of her section, Kate has been silent. And she's been silent because she's been grieving and she's been this kind of omnipresent. Within all the other stories there's always a reference to her sitting at the site and people bringing tea to her and her inability to

communicate. What I find really interesting is the silence, although we know it's through grief, when she does start to speak, what she starts to talk about is a kind of a cultural silence, a political silence around women, how her grandmother had been on her wedding day slapped in the face because she accepted an engagement ring and basically, because of the belief that if a young woman wasn't preoccupied with family, that they were possibly promiscuous or disrespectful or whatever. And so these kinds of intergenerational silences kind of form the basis of the story that you just heard. I just really like how on the very banal, kind of dramatic, level it tells us what Kate is now thinking, but ultimately what it's doing is speaking the silences that have been kind of overlaid or have been part of Traveller women's voices.

That is how I kind of read this section. And having worked with the women and having gathered their oral histories and memories of site, I think the personal histories and the personal memories are really political. In a lot of senses, they're sort of unheard voices. And I'm not trying to speak for the women here myself, but what I'm saying is that the stories are really important and that there's very little places where we hear those stories. Rosaleen's book has kind of been discussed in terms of being a voice for what happens within Traveller communities, and the dynamics and the cultural aspects. And it's not that we don't know what those are, I think it's that Travellers have been framed as Other and as different, and it's the difference that we don't understand. Like we're all different. We all have different family beliefs and traditions, but there's a very strong division between Travellers and others. And it creates these unknown aspects that I think when people speak and actually discuss their relationships to sites and to family and to each other, I think it opens up that space.

So yeah, I suppose that's kind of the importance, I would see, of the oral histories and how they've been mapped to different sites, and, I think in a very banal way, when we're mapping Traveller sites, we're kind of mapping sites that are no longer available for Travellers. And I think I mentioned this at the opening that the amount of historic sites versus the amount of official sites in comparison is huge. It's massive. There's no traditional sites and there's very, very little official sites.

I've been working on different projects for a few years with Travellers. It started with the Traveller Collection Project, where initially I was invited to make a piece of public art down in Cork, and when I visited the area in Knocknaheeny — we got a tour of the area, pre-redevelopment — our guide was a local man and he was showing us around the area and he was saying, "We're so excited that the artists will be coming in to work with the community and how broad this idea of community is. You can engage with people in the city, you can engage internationally." And as he was saying that we passed by Saint Anthony's, which is a group housing scheme, and then he went, "Oh, but that's the Travellers, you won't need to engage with them." So, he thought this was very *funny*, but I was like, "Well, why would we not need to engage with them? They're in this community."

Anyway, it led to me working with that community to put forward a proposal and we didn't get accepted. And I don't mind that we didn't get accepted, it might not have been the best, but the

reason (we didn't get accepted) that was given was that they didn't have the resources to work with vulnerable communities. So that kind of bothered me because if you're creating funding and policies around public art and what that means — *who is the public?* And if we can't deal with every member of the public, there's a problem with that policy.

From then I've worked with different groups and sometimes I kind of lead in terms of what I think is important to what we should do, and other times it's been the groups themselves who decide, and then I facilitate and work with that.

So, the sites. The first time we worked to map sites in Edenderry, in Offaly? In Westmeath? It's somewhere on the cusp. It's both. Up there we mapped all these sites and the young men really wanted to know where they came from. And I was like, "Well, why don't you just ask your parents or grandparents?" And they were like, "We don't have a reason to ask them." So, just the intergenerational kind of, I suppose, the gaps — like, not being on the road means that there isn't really a reason to talk about the sites that you would have stayed on. The reason why you would choose a site, whether it's historic or because it's such a good place or proximity to family or occupations or whatever it is. There's all sorts of reasons why sites were chosen. And without being in that situation, it's maybe not necessary to carry those stories. And the idea that that kind of very personal, but also relational to the landscape, that that kind of knowledge was disappearing, and that the young men, in order to know about themselves, they needed to know about their relationship to the land.

I kind of continued that work with other groups. We did a project in Sligo and there was a Brian Dylan from the Traveller Housing Association, and he spoke really amazingly about the importance of collecting those sites. In fact, the Irish Traveller Movement have made recommendations for years around doing projects to document traditional stopping places in order to facilitate what is, I think it's statutory, that the State has to support minority communities. It's both European and Irish. And we have to facilitate those cultures and support them and respect them and that involves having temporary halting sites. Whereas as we all know, temporary halting sites are illegal, and traveling is criminalized since 2002.

Brian was invited to pilot a transitory site, a temporary halting site, and for about a year he played with the idea of this. How would it work? Who would stay there? How would you organize it? Who's allowed in and who's not allowed in? And he eventually came to the realization that he was being set up for failure. That there was no way that creating one temporary halting site could be successful without knowing the history and the knowledges around why that site exists. And as I was saying, what makes a good camping place? What's its proximity to all those other things? So, his response then was that instead of piloting a temporary halting site, maybe what we needed to do was to run a national project to collect the knowledge and the histories and to reinstate that knowledge so that people might start then to know and understand where these sites are, what their importance is and from there, you could reinstate temporary halting sites, if that was the actual goal.

So, it's really hot outside and, I'm not keeping everyone, but, what I did want to do because, I suppose I have just explained it a tiny bit — the oral histories that we gathered, we sent them to Oberstown Detention Centre and the young people made these paintings, but we also sent them to Rosaleen McDonagh and to Caitlyn O'Reilly and Caitlyn wrote a poem, and then that poem was transferred into a song. So just in case anybody hasn't heard it, it's three minutes long, and I'm just going to play the whole thing through. And maybe some of the words are a little bit tricky to catch because it wasn't written as a song, it's written as a poem. But I'm just going to play that through, and then maybe if anybody has some questions or wants to say anything. And then we'll finish up by reading Rosaleen's short text on Heywood.

*(Recording of Rosie McCarthy singing 'Maggie Brawn' (2026) plays)*

*The rivers flow high  
high enough to fight back and purify  
the ever green brown I muck upon now  
The halt; rundown  
and has been ever since its charter  
and pushed far off by a backroad  
We were never to be known.*

*Swamping  
I am far from Palace Green  
Swamping  
Though I've picked the golden tink,  
Swamping  
My dress frills and frills and ends the day  
swamping in its rurality*

*I spend fire crisp and dried out quid  
never on a frivolous thing  
we hide our money in mattresses that soak  
and our horses we tie by the river bay  
and we bet them all the same*

*He built for me with not a pony by his side  
this place we now settle in*

*There is stability in our stables  
comfort in our cottage  
and a gape in our gate  
open in ways the world has never been  
Wagons by the tens and those tents I pray too  
there always seem to be a wandering few.*

*We fight battles over councils we never sit upon  
They spit on our grain  
and place on us all the blame  
I find no dirt in our good for nothing name  
I am a Purcell  
an O'Reilly  
and a Traveller all the same.*

**Séamus Nolan:** So that is Rosie McCarthy. So, I don't know if anybody wanted to say anything about the — like, Purcells is where that track is based on, and it's out in Twomilebridge (Co. Tipperary) and, as far as I know, everybody would stay there at some point. All the O'Reilly's and all the Travellers in Clonmel. But yeah, I suppose just to open up the floor if anybody has any questions or comments, you're more than welcome.

*(Q&A starts)*

**Helena Tobin:** I wanted Séamus to come in because he's a safe pair of hands, and he's somebody who is passionate about what he does and really knowledgeable about the community, and (he) isn't somebody outside coming in and kind of just sticking their nose in and upsetting things, which can often happen when artists aren't maybe experienced at engaging with groups. It doesn't matter what kind of group, it could just be the local lads down the pub. If you don't meet people where they're at, you can really make things worse rather than improve communication. And I suppose I grew up beside settled Travellers, and would know a lot about the community myself, but really think it's important that there's proper connections made that are meaningful. And I hope — like, Séamus and I had already been chatting on the opening night about the other things we could do - is there a way to continue conversations? And as you all know, once you kind of start working with the community, you try and find funding to keep working with them. But it's not always easy. But you try. There's always ways and means, but it's the first bit is the hardest sometimes, and that maybe if we

can all come up with ideas, we can work together to get some other stuff on the go and maybe get a proper monument put somewhere.

*(Q&A continues)*

**Séamus Nolan:** I didn't mention it, but it's (the map) on Traveller Collection. So the ones (sites) that I've been involved with, and that people have allowed, are on the website, in the geography section. But there's also other projects where they've mapped sites, but they haven't resolved how they should be shared. And you know yourselves, if you have somebody's very personal story, and if somebody else doesn't really agree with that — or if somebody dies and people are grieving — having your story made public and shared can be kind of problematic. And also I think it's a kind of difficulty with sort of digital media, it kind of promotes access. It hyper-promotes access. We have access to all the information we want in the world, but what we don't have is a connection to it. And indigenous knowledges, like all indigenous knowledges, are based on relationships to the land, to people. And it kind of flies in the face of the technology that you use, because that's not about creating connections. So, yeah, what we have and what people have been happy to share is up online. But, even with the map that's there, there was other sites that are even active today where people stay, and, I didn't want to draw attention to those because people can live on margins and visibility becomes a cloak as well. You can live the way you want to live if you're not put out in the public. So, it's a funny balance between being seen and having access to rights and then being not seen and having access to land and to places within your family. So, yeah, it's on Traveller Collection if anybody wants to look at more stuff we've collected.

But I'm just going to finish with the *Heywood Road*, the text that Rosaleen wrote, because we kind of ran out of time to turn this into a song and to have that part of the exhibition as well, but it's included in the booklet. And if anybody wants a copy of the booklet, just leave your name in the office because we have a few of them and once we have given them to everyone who needs them, there'll be some left over or we might get some more. So, I'm not a great reader...

*(Séamus Nolan reads Heywood Road by Dr. Rosaleen McDonagh)*

*We were the walking people. We knew how roads hardened after rain, when mares foaled at the dark edge of morning, and when soft ground could set the hazel rods or bear the weight of barrel tops. The seasons were our people's guides.*

*Heywood was always a camping road, generations have lived and died on it. In the past farmers would leave two rows of potatoes in the field. One for the birds. One for our people. Women carried water in milk churns, balanced in prams. Men worked shoulder to shoulder farmer and Traveller. Two brothers grazed their milking cows in these fields. When they died, their cows disappeared too.*

*In Heywood, every man can name every horse his father has ever owned. They stood behind trailers like old kings awaiting battle, steam lifting from their backs in the pale light of dawn, their breath folding into the cold air like prayers.*

*Horses were fed before men. Horses mean movement. Movement means survival, and dignity. A horse carries more than a body; it carries memory, trade, stories and the restless instinct to move before a place turns hostile. Their hooves sounding on the road like a second heartbeat. It is survival. It is our inheritance. It is part of our language.*

*Tony Reilly refused to enter Heywood until the council agreed to set aside space for the horses. The animals mattered more than the houses. Three bays first, then the houses, and afterwards the rest was built by our fiens, our men.*

*Beside the fairy fort stands our tree. It's a Cedar of Lebanon, first planted in Ireland in the 1640s. The timber from those trees was once used for boat building, for moving people across water, like the ships that first brought people to this island. The tree carries its own migration story in its bark, like our ancestors, who arrived and rooted themselves in difficult ground. The tree becomes a map of nomadism that refuses to be erased. Its branches bending against the winds without breaking.*

*When the council tried to cut it down. Heywood fought back. We travelled to Dublin and saw preservation orders. We defended not only the tree, but also memory, lineage and belonging. Like the tree, we have found a home in this windy place, the Ard Gaoithe, the high winds that give Heywood its name. The tree has watched over the camps, the trailers, the horses and the generations. Some say we protected the tree, some say the tree is our protector.*

**Séamus Nolan** is one of Ireland's leading collaborative arts practitioners. He recently completed a PhD with the School of Art History and Cultural Policy, UCD, the School of Visual Culture, NCAD, and the Collections Department at the IMMA. His practice-based research examines the role of contemporary museums in representing marginal cultures, with a specific focus on Irish Travellers.

**Dr. Rosaleen McDonagh** is a writer, playwright, performer and a member of Aosdána. Her plays include *The Baby Doll Project*, *She's Not Mine*, *Rings*, *The Prettiest Proud Boy* and *Mainstream*. Her most recent commissions were *Walls and Windows*, followed by *Backbone* for the Abbey Theatre and *Context* for Pavee Point, which loosely documents the forty-year history of Pavee Point. She is part of the Navigator Series by Fishamble for 2026. She is the author of *Unsettled* (Skein Press, 2021) and *Contentious Spaces* (Skein Press, 2026). Rosaleen holds a BA, two MPhils from Trinity College Dublin and a PhD from Northumbria University. She was reappointed a Human Rights Commissioner in June 2025 and is a member of the Arts Council of Ireland.

**Helena Tobin** is Artistic Director & Curator at South Tipperary Arts Centre. In 2024 she took part in ICI's International Curatorial Exchange at EXPO Chicago as one of two invited Irish curators. With over 20 years' experience working in the Arts, she has expertise in developing and delivering an extensive range of ambitious projects across a broad section of the Arts including her recent work at STAC. Former positions include the Abbey Theatre, Kilkenny Arts Festival, and Fenton Gallery, Cork. She was co-founder and director of SITEATION, an artists' collective and project space, formerly located in Dublin (2012-2014). Recent projects of note include curating *Mountains, Fall on us* by Austin McQuinn at Limerick City Gallery of Art, 2024, which was accompanied by a monograph publication, as well as devising and curating the touring exhibition 'WAAG – an archive'. She has written for VAN journal and has served on national assessment panels including for the Arts Council of Ireland and is currently a member of KCAT advisory curatorial group. A graduate of the MA in Visual Art Practices, IADT and the BA in Fine Art from Crawford College of Art and Design, her own artwork has been exhibited throughout Ireland and is in the public collections of the OPW and Cork Institute of Technology (now MTU).

**Cliona Maher** (Creative Producer/Festival Maker) is a Clonmel native with over 35 years' experience working in the arts across Ireland, the US, and France. A graduate of the Gaiety School of Acting, she holds an MA in Modern Drama Studies (First Class Honours) from UCD. Since returning to Ireland in 2017, she has held leading roles in regional arts development, including Director at South Tipperary Arts Centre, where she co-founded Finding A Voice music festival. She went on to serve as Artistic Director of Clonmel Junction Arts Festival (2019–2024), programming six editions of the multi-disciplinary arts festival, and producing/commissioning new theatre work such as *Everything Must GO!* with Asylum Productions/Once Off. Recent work includes producing the theatre production *From Out The Land* (Art:2023) and co-producing the film *Songs of Blood and Destiny* with Trish McAdam, based on *iGirl* by Marina Carr. She is currently producing *AI BABY* for Niche Films (release 2027). She is a member of the Performing Arts Forum Festival-Makers Working Group and will co-produce the 2027 Frank Fest celebrating Frank McGuinness with b\*spoke productions.

#### Websites Mentioned:

Traveller Collection: <https://travellercollection.ie/info>