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Traditional sailing boats, embodied knowledge(s) and dwelling in coastal rural communities: The case of the ‘Galway Hooker’ in South West Conamara, Ireland

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Highlights

Traditional hooker boats were key ‘actants’ in assembling the region and everyday life of South West Conamara communities.

Embodied knowledge offers distinct insights on ‘being-in-the-world’ and the meaning attached to traditional sailing craft.

Attention to sensory/sensuous knowledge conveys the uniquely intimate relationship between bádóirí and their boats.

Places and experiences of rural ‘community’ can be understood through human-nonhuman-nature relations over time.

A *living tradition* and community heritage significance of sailing the boats today must be linked to a relational approach.

Abstract

In the context of a healthy flourishing within rural studies on embodied knowledges and ‘human-nonhuman-nature’ relations, such a relational focus is of especial significance for coastal places where the relations and knowledges connecting humans with less predictable natural phenomena (tides, weather, rocks, fish) and nonhuman elements, such as sea vessels, served to generate ‘dwelling’. Within wider rural studies there is a need for greater attentiveness to those rural places, traditions and knowledges where the sea rather than land has occupied a more dominant presence in the lives and imaginations of people. This study is based in the coastal and rural region of south west Conamara in the West of Ireland where a distinctive family of boats collectively known as the ‘hooker’ remains a deeply revered part of the region's cultural heritage across generations and continues to be actively used for recreation and leisure. Our qualitative study is based primarily on interviews with thirty-three bádóirí (‘boatmen’) across older and younger generations, as well as participant observation and documentary evidence. We attempt to show how the coalescence of the natural, material and cultural dimensions of place was constituted through the hooker as sailing vessel. Despite the decline in its livelihood dimension, we seek to place its community significance and continuity within the distinctive ‘embodied spatialities of being’ that are quite different in places where the sea has played a prominent element in the assembly of life over time. In charting the historically vital role of the hooker and the bádóirí embodied knowledge for

dwelling in south west Conamara, we show to some extent the distinct ‘rhythmic practices of place’ of coastal communities over much of their history. We argue that we cannot fully appreciate how contemporary places, spaces and the experience of ‘community’ and ‘tradition’ are rendered meaningful unless we understand the nature of such connections and their relational dimensions across time.

Keywords

Traditional sailing boats
Embodied knowledges
Dwelling
Place
Relational rural
Conamara/Connemara

1. Introduction

Despite a wide range of maritime studies concerning resource use, sustainable fisheries, cultural imaginaries and the political economy of oceans, it has been argued that “contemporary relations between people and oceanic nature have been somewhat neglected in the academic domain” ([Benediktsson and Waage, 2015](#), p.41). There has however been a flourishing literature within leisure studies and cultural geographies (e.g. [Anderson, 2012](#); [Anderson and Peters, 2014](#); [Brown and Humberstone, 2015](#); [Couper, 2018](#)) concerning contemporary engagement with the sea mostly through lifestyle sports. Studies of rural communities historically relying on the sea for livelihoods are somewhat less evident, particularly concerning the relations and knowledges connecting humans with natural (tides, weather, rocks) and nonhuman elements, such as sea vessels, that serve to generate ‘dwelling’. Like many land-based rural practices and knowledges, the shift away from traditional livelihoods in such communities has created discontinuities in the distinctive forms of embodied knowledge, practices and relations that have inhered within maritime culture and communities over generations. The rapid transformation in recent decades may have altered the everyday livelihoods in such communities but the ‘potent connections’/‘affinities’ ([Mason, 2018](#)) and sense of belonging to places, people and cultural objects very often remain far more enduring. This calls for appreciation for the distinctive coalescence of the natural, material and cultural components through which dwelling in any rural environment has occurred over time; an approach that has had a healthy flourishing within rural studies on embodied knowledges and ‘human-nonhuman-nature’ relations (e.g. [Carolan, 2008](#); [Cloke and Jones, 2001](#); [Cloke and Jones, 2004](#)). It is of especial significance for coastal places where particularly less predictable natural phenomena (the sea, fish, weather, landscape) have shaped the local histories of dwelling and the “relational context of people's engagement with the world” around which can be drawn their unique significance ([Ingold, 1993](#): 155).

It is in this context that our study of traditional boat sailing and livelihood is presented. The study is based in the coastal and rural region of south west Conamara¹ in the West of Ireland where a distinctive family of boats collectively known as the ‘hooker’ (see Figure A) remains a deeply revered part of the region's cultural heritage across generations and continues to be actively used for recreation and leisure. We attempt to show how the coalescence of the natural, material and cultural dimensions of place was constituted through the hooker as

sailing vessel. Despite the decline in the livelihood dimension of the hooker, we seek to place its community significance and continuity within the distinctive ‘embodied spatialities of being’ (Couper, 2018) that are quite different in places where the sea has played a prominent element in the assembly of life over time. With its primary focus on the hooker, we argue that understanding this place and the cultural continuity of traditional practices can be found in the embodied personal and social knowledge and meanings that such ‘actants’ generate(d) in order to ‘dwell’ in coastal rural communities. The knowledge and skill of how to navigate this craft vessel was key to the way of life and survival of local coastal communities and the ‘taskscape’ of the region (Ingold, 2000). Although the hooker is specific to this region, there are similar traditional boats in maritime communities across the world from which we think our analysis holds particular relevance. Our qualitative study is based primarily on interviews with thirty-three bádóirí (‘boatmen’ or hooker sailors)² and boat builders, as well as participant observation and documentary evidence.

The paper first sets the scene by briefly outlining the historical and cultural context of the hooker (Box 1). It then discusses the theoretical framework of embodied knowledges within the context of ‘dwelling’ and ‘human-nonhuman-nature’ relations. Following an overview of the research study, our findings are thematically presented through the lens of embodied knowledges in its varied forms.

Box 1

Context of the Galway ‘hooker’ boats

The term ‘hooker’ is a general English word applied to a family of boats (of same shape but different sizes and sail configurations; see Fig. 1) that have different names in Conamara (native Irish speaking rural region) but which were connected with ‘hook and line’ fishing. While there is no clear certainty of its origins, the suitability of the hooker family of boats to working the waters and coastlines of Galway Bay is beyond question. Some believe that it can be traced to a seventeenth century Dutch boat called the ‘Hoeker’ (www.galwaycitymuseum.ie/galway-hooker/). The hooker remains the iconic traditional boat associated with Galway and occupies a key position in the maritime heritage and identity of the region. The Galway Hooker Association, founded in 1978, continues to actively promote the use of the boat through organised races each year and promotional material, while the Galway City museum is home to a long-term exhibition of its heritage. The place known as ‘south west Conamara’ along the western seaboard of Ireland spans approximately 150 miles of coastline (see Fig. 2 in methodology section) and is a region noted for its rugged landscape and continuity of the Irish language and culture. In the absence of a decent road network and other viable means of transport up until around the 1950s this traditional ‘hooker’ boat constituted a key ‘lifeline’ in people's everyday lives in these coastal communities (Scott, 2004: 19). It enabled the shipment of foodstuffs from the main urban settlement of Galway city to the local shops in the coastal region and in return the provision of a type of peat fuel known as ‘turf’ (which the area had an abundant supply of) to parts of south Galway, the Aran Islands lying to the west and county Clare to the south. In addition, the hooker was used to transport livestock to and from the fairs, kelp to a local seaweed factory, as well as ‘poteen’ (illegally distilled alcohol) to various locations. Today, the hooker is used mostly for pleasure sailing and there are approximately fifteen regattas held each year, between May and September, from Kinvara in south Galway to Roundstone in the west. There are now approximately forty boats in the hooker family (the hooker types are called: ‘Leath-bháid’; ‘Gleoitogai Móra’ and ‘Beaga’; and ‘Púcáin’), that sail annually in Conamara and around

sixty on the entire Island of Ireland. At one festival in 2010, the Galway Hooker Association reported that thirty-four boats took part, with an estimated 150 participants involved in the sailing.



Fig. 1. Hookers participating in a hooker race. Image courtesy of [Petroni and Dossena \(2016\)](#).



Fig. 2. Map of South West Conamara in West of Ireland and main trading routes.

2. Conceptualising knowledge and ‘dwelling’

While our main focus is on the nature of knowledge that inheres within the heritage of the hooker, our starting point is to set knowledge in the context of a ‘dwelling’ perspective, which has been particularly influential in thinking about nature-society relations, place and landscape. Inspired by [Heidegger's \(1971\)](#) work, dwelling captures the idea that human activity is not about imposing objects onto the world but that we actively shape the world “through a readiness-at-hand (e.g. by physically encountering/using/manipulating them) rather than a present-at-hand (e.g. from a detached, intellectualised position” ([Carolan, 2008](#): 413). In Cloke and Jones's applications of dwelling (2004: 325) they describe it as a “complex performative achievement of heterogeneous actors in relational settings in time and space: an embodied, co-constituted habitation of the human and nonhuman”. It is central to this understanding of dwelling that ‘things’ are vital to the realisation of ‘relational agency’ and Cloke and Jones in a number of studies (2001; [Cloke and Jones, 2004](#)) foreground how the nonhuman entities of orchards, trees and cemeteries produce this in multiple combinations, linking a variety of actors/actants across time and space. In the vocabulary of actor-network theory, actants are the nonhuman entities that connect, assemble and facilitate the flows of interactions and networks. Deriving from controversies and studies within ‘science and technology studies’, actor network theory has sought to subvert the well-established dualisms within ‘conventional’ sociology between constructs such as the natural and social, agency and structure, object and subject, macro and micro, human and nonhuman (see [Latour, 2000](#); [Latour, 2005](#); [Law, 2009](#)). Most notably and controversially, it has provoked reassessment about those ‘things’, objects and nonhuman entities which have ordinarily been disregarded in contributing to agency in terms understandable to humanistic sociology. In undertaking any empirical investigation, the actor network approach argues for ‘symmetry’, which rails against privileging one form of actor over another, particularly the convention of treating humans as the key actors in explaining particular ‘social’ outcomes or effects ([Latour, 2005](#)). This does not mean extending intentionality to things or objects, and mechanical attributes to humans ([Callon and Latour, 1992](#)). Rather, these heterogeneous entities need to be examined in relation to each other – co-constituting the ‘actor-network’. For the actor network investigator, actions arise through relations and to define the actor is to also define the network to which it relates. Early empirical studies, such as [Callon's \(1984\)](#) on efforts by scientists to restock scallops in St Brieuc Bay, France, illustrated the importance of paying attention to the nonhuman entities that can unpredictably shape the formation of scientific projects. While the nuances of this translation process are quite complex, it showed that natural entities (in this case larvae, predators, parasites, water currents, temperature) and technical artefacts (towlines, netted bags) don't always behave or act predictably or in accordance with the goals of human actors. While our study is very much different, the main ‘actant’ of interest in a general sense is the ‘hooker’ boat as it co-constituted the (changing) place of south west Conamara and through which we assess the significance of embodied knowledge. Such knowledge implicates relations with a range of nonhuman elements, including the boat's physical structure and various parts, local topography as well as the elements of tides, rocks, piers, roads and weather.

Adopting a dwelling perspective fosters an appreciation and attentiveness to “the rich, intimate, ongoing togetherness of beings and things, the recognition of time-deepened experience, embodied experience, the experience of rootedness, the richness of things together over time, and the valuing of local distinctiveness” ([Cloke and Jones, 2001](#): 654). In attempting to capture this togetherness and local distinctiveness we seek to convey some of what [Carolan \(2008\)](#) describes as the ‘more-than-representational’ embodied knowledge/s

inhering within/through the hooker and its significance to the idea of cultural heritage. We turn next to those aspects of knowledge through which we can appreciate this dwelling.

2.1. Knowledge – embodied, skilled and crafted

A range of authors (e.g. [Harrison, 2000](#); [Carolan, 2008](#); [Krzywoszynska, 2016](#); [Rodriguez Castro, 2018](#); [Couper, 2018](#)) have sought to redirect the study of knowledge by asserting that what we know, how we care, understand and perceive the world cannot be understood outside of the embodied, sensuous, lived experience through which consciousness is attained (as ‘more-than-representational’). Understanding knowledge cannot be seen as somehow detached or external to the embodied interactions we have with our environments over time but exists through interdependence of bodies and environments. Again, in the influential work of anthropologist Ingold (2000; [Ingold, 2011](#)) knowledge is viewed as gathered through ‘wayfaring’; that is movement in life and practical engagement with the environment, leading to a practical understanding of the lifeworld. This perspective underscores the importance of the sensory/sensuous dimensions through which knowledge is acquired and is particularly relevant to our study with its focus on sailing, craftsmanship and prolonged interaction with nature and materials. A particularly insightful analysis of the embodied experiences of the countryside is [Carolan's \(2008\)](#) study of the ways that farmers and non-farmers know the countryside differently through their bodies and the ways that different technologies (tractors, bikes, cars, etc), mobilities and habituations constitute awareness and being-in-the-world. We live and know through our bodies and this knowledge inhabits different moral landscapes, affections and connections to the countryside.

In a similar sense to [Carolan \(2008\)](#), others have written about the uniquely kinaesthetic and embodied sense of being and place found within/on the sea, particularly through such experiences as surfing, sailing and kayaking (see e.g. [Anderson, 2012](#); [Brown, 2017](#); [Humberstone, 2011](#)).³ Unlike our terrestrial based experiences, those who encounter being on/in the sea and on boats or other watercraft are struck by the different sense of space, time, mobilities, movement and ‘rhythmpatterns’ ([Jones, 2011](#)) that unfold. Brown, on pleasure sailing, discusses the process of different attunement demanded of the body on the water, encountering the ocean and the elements in all their wildness. Here “*wild places themselves take the lead*. However active and perceptive our bodies may be, they end up following this lead, tracing out the threads the wild world weaves before and around us” ([Casey, 2009](#): 225 cited in [Brown, 2017](#): 688). Brown's autoethnographic study focuses on the process of ‘enskilment’ ([Ingold, 2000](#)) which effectively requires a “need to let the sea embed itself *in me* rather than rely on any ability on my part to impose my will on the sea” ([Brown, 2017](#): 689; emphasis in original). Similarly, for [Anderson \(2012\)](#), it is through a converged sense of union and being ‘at one’ with the surfed wave that surfers encounter a distinct sense of the sea as place, albeit provisional and conditional on a range of components such as swell, tide, reef, wind, etc. [Couper's \(2018\)](#) autoethnography of learning to sail reveals how the motion of the sea, tides, movement of other boats, the ‘invisible beneath’ make for different spatial demands and accentuate a sense of nature as Other. Nature is ever-present and “the agency of water and weather is always there, in the unending motion, communicated through the boat and thus through the body” (p.11). What was particularly accentuated in her experience is the contrast to the sense of linear space and separation from nature that urban living produces. In a more ‘ecosocial’ analysis, [Jones's \(2011\)](#) detailed study of tides, estuaries and material culture illuminates the distinctiveness of oceanic forces, rhythms, flows and ecologies in assembling the material culture of coastal areas around the world. In paying attention to the power of tides on ecologies, economies and cultures, Jones shows that “water performs (in

ceaseless processes of flows and cycles and its material fluidities are of immediate and profound practical concerns to bodies, landscapes, and more besides” (p.2300). While there are many nuances in his account, he argues that tides bring distinct ‘rhythmpatterns’ to people's lives and people are embedded in “*rhythmic ‘practices of place’*” (p.2292; italics in original). This key insight resonates with the bádóirí accounts of the significance of reading nature's rhythmpatterns, which we discuss later. For these authors and others such as [Steinberg and Peters \(2015\)](#); see also [Bear and Bull, 2011](#)), there are very distinctive qualities of the ocean that open up new thinking about place, territory, time and the politics of space. [Steinberg and Peters \(2015\)](#) in particular have challenged terrestrialised assumptions about place (and politics of territory) in their critical analysis of the ocean's unique spatial dimensions, namely its immense volume and depths, water's transformative materiality and speed (as liquid, vapour, ice), its movement and motion (often chaotic). As this selective range of literature illustrates, scholarship of/about the sea, coastal spaces and actants in everyday life adds distinctive insights for broader rural studies.

Returning to ‘embodied’ knowledge in this context, navigating the ocean and seascapes of the coastline and working the hooker entailed considerable cultivation and transmission of particular ways of knowing across time. In the absence of modern technology and equipment, the nature of ‘enskilment’ of the older generations of bádóirí can be thought of in terms of cultivating a form of ‘craftsmanship’ ([Sennett, 2008](#); [O'Connor, 2005](#)). Acquiring proficiency in practice, Sennett deconstructs the connection between material and bodily self within the craftsman to the point where s/he must lose all self-awareness and focus entirely on and feel as one with the material on which s/he works; to a point where: ‘We have become the thing on which we are working’. He outlines that while all limbs are used in the expression of tacit skills, the hand is the one with least restricted mind-controlled movement. To understand the basis of craftsmanship, according to Sennett, we must appreciate the foundational aspects of touch and hand technique in the acquisition of skilled practice and it is the triad of eye-brain-hand that “allows touching, gripping, and seeing to work in concert” (p.153). Sensory knowledge features later in our exploration of those skilled practices of navigating and experiencing the hooker.

Yet another important feature of knowledge is the collective and shared sense within which learning occurs, based on the accumulated knowledge of others coming before and seeking out ways to solve the everyday practical problems of their lives. As Ingold expresses it “the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there somethings of themselves” (1993: 152). In a local community setting, one's depth of appropriate knowledge becomes evident very quickly, as does one's family connection to sailing. This is expressed by the appropriate esteem and regard - transmitted through attentive silence - towards those who are deemed to be ‘wise’. The wise are those who have mastered the craft of creating easy access to knowledge in order to guide their actions ([Pálsson, 1994](#): 916). They have accumulated a store of knowledge over years of prolonged engagement, and can instinctively interpret and anticipate how to take action with relative speed, accuracy and ease, or perhaps conclude it is best to refrain from taking action, even speaking ([Pálsson, 1994](#): 901–907). There is, as [O'Connor \(2005](#): 200) demonstrates, a cognitive and non-reflective corporeal ability to anticipate “the world's imminence in which she operates” that marks proficient practical knowledge of those most accomplished in their craft. With the intimate knowledge of his/her landscape the wise know how things/life played out there previously and can forewarn or advise people through anticipation of what might happen there again in certain circumstances. As [Edmondson \(2005\)](#) has explored in her examination of wisdom and

ageing, forms of wisdom (whether as proverbs or maxims, actions or ways of living) have social, ethical and emotional aspects which “give them an inter-personal mode of existence that extends over time and space” (p.353) and it is important to be ethnographically attentive to the social *effects* and meanings that ‘wise’ people have on particular contexts and communities of use. As explored later, the engagement with nature and its elements demands attentiveness to the wisdom of the more experienced bádóirí.

3. The research study & methodology

The study is primarily based on qualitative interviews with those whose own lives and their families have been immersed in sailing in the south-west Conamara region (see [Fig. 2](#)). Interviews were conducted during the 2013–2014 hooker sailing season, over a period of nine months. A total of thirty-three interviews were recorded, resulting in approximately 31 h of interview material and 315 pages of transcribed interviews and fieldnotes. The vast majority of participants were men, reflecting the traditional dominance of men as hooker baidoiri and craftsmen in this practice. It should be noted that there are very few of the trading-bádóirí alive and the interviews did include one of the last men (then aged 94 years but now deceased) for whom sailing the Galway hooker represented the sole means of income for most of his working life. [Table 1](#) outlines a number of categories that emerged from these interviews regarding the level of engagement in hooker life.

Table 1. Interview categories and profile.

Category A	Those who had been partly or entirely dependant on the boat for their income, through trade in turf, materials or fishing, with the hooker	3 interviews (all males aged between 71 & 94 years)
Category B	Persons who had/have a direct family link with persons from category A. These people are all very experienced hooker bádóirí and have learned from others who qualify for category A	11 interviews (9 males & 2 females, aged between 37 & 60 years)
Category C	Older Persons with good/moderate experience of hooker sailing and did learn from a direct family member or others from category A or B	<u>5 interviews (all males aged between 61 & 71 years)</u>
Category D	Younger Persons with good/moderate experience of hooker sailing and did learn from a direct family member, others from category A, B, C or hooker-sailing course	<u>7 interviews (6 males & 1 female aged between 16 & 51 years)</u>
Category E	Hooker Makers/‘Saor Báid’, through direct experience or on the Horizon funded Hooker-Builder Apprentice Scheme	<u>4 interviews (all males between the ages of 36 & 60 years)</u>
Category F	Persons who are attempting to earn a living through the hooker today or have attempted to within the recent past, excluding the boat-builders (NB: some of these persons are included in other categories also).	<u>4 interview (3 males & 1 female aged between 37 and 71 years)</u>
Category G	Persons who might not have extensive hooker sailing experience, but have a vast knowledge of hooker life as their family/husband sailed in the hookers as a means of making a living.	<u>2 interviews (both female, aged between 60 and 80 years)</u>

Interviews were conducted by one of the authors who has lived in the area for over two decades, and has been actively involved in local youth and cultural projects as well as part-owner of a Galway hooker built in the 1920s. Having spent many summers sailing and fishing in it and competing in the hooker races, the author is also a fluent Irish speaker, in a region where Irish is the predominant language. The researcher straddles an ‘insider’/‘outsider’ status, in the sense that although living in the area for decades and actively involved in community and sailing life, there is always a tacit understanding of not being ‘born and bred’ there. While conscious of one’s ‘insider/outsiderness’ in doing research in small rural communities (see [Neal and Walters, 2008](#)), the ‘insiderness’ was obvious through the experiential knowledge of sailing in a hooker and the area’s culture, which allowed participants a good degree of comfort to express themselves freely using the distinctive vocabulary that accompanies the hooker; a vocabulary and knowledge difficult to decipher for those unfamiliar with it.

The majority of interviews (twenty four) were conducted in the homes of the participants, while four were interviewed in the home of the author who lives in the area. The remainder were interviewed in locations convenient for the participants. Access to participants was generated through a combination of personal knowledge and snowballing. Interviews were all conducted in the Irish language (Gaeilge), transcribed in Irish, analysed in Irish and then translated to English. Undertaking the research in the native language of participants posed some methodological issues in the study. It was significant to undertake the interviews in Irish since all of the interviewees are fluent Irish speakers and the culture and the vocabulary of the Galway hooker is in Irish. There were differences however between the dialect of the researcher and the language of those who live in the area, which means that at times there could be some variation in vocabulary. However, there was near-correct understanding because of the ability to know the context in which they speak and to observe the body language they adopt. When translating without being in the position to see how something is said, one has to rely more on one’s own interpretation of what is meant. Translating into English was also a challenge because of the loss of meaning that takes place.

We set out in an exploratory way to understand how the Galway hooker enabled the region’s population to live there. Apart from a small number of historical books, there remains a dearth of published material on the Galway hooker, particularly that which seeks to understand the hooker through human-nonhuman-nature relations. The study used grounded theory method, a specific methodology developed by [Glaser and Strauss \(1967\)](#) for “the purpose of building theory from data” (cited in [Corbin and Strauss, 2008](#): 1). Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves. The data is constructed through the researcher’s interaction with the participants, utilising that which is said, but also noting what one observes and feels. The grounded theory method is based on an iterative process between data collection and analysis and the researcher starts out with a broad or general research question, one that guides or enables focus for the project, but it is not necessarily so specific as to exclude discovery ([Bryant and Charmaz, 2007](#): 324).

After the initial coding process was complete, fifty-five different codes, each related to Conamara Life and the Galway hooker were elicited. The software package NVivo was used to manage the analysis. Once the initial coding was complete, the second-level coding entitled ‘Axial Coding’ was undertaken. At this level the analyst is ‘firming-up’ the recognised themes. At the previous level (open coding) one might have unwittingly created two or perhaps three individual codes that were so similar as to be of the same theme. With

an initial fifty-five codes arising from the open coding, some codes were merged together under the most appropriate or new heading. This second-phase coding involved much re-ordering, often re-labeling and merging, and when complete, resulted in eight major codes, most of which contained many sub-codes. The final coding level is called 'Theoretical Coding' where as [Boyatzis \(1998\)](#) notes this stage sees the researcher interpret the information and identify themes in a way that contributes to the development of knowledge, requiring some theoretical or conceptual framework. It is however of critical importance to avoid 'projection', that is the researcher imposing his/her own thoughts on what the participant is saying. This fact can also be a block to effective thematic analysis because the greater the familiarity that the researcher has on the subject, the stronger the urge to project, according to [Boyatzis \(1998\)](#): 13).

We now turn to some of the 'relational' dimensions of the hooker, focussing first on the regional level.

3.1. The region and taskscape

The landscape within which the bádóirí sailed and worked every day, creating, adjusting and maintaining an evolving and changing a pattern of enactment and animation with the other components of the landscape, created, what Ingold terms the 'taskscape' (see [Ingold, 1993](#)). As Ingold maintains "Every task takes its meaning from its position within an ensemble of tasks, performed in series or in parallel, and usually by many people working together" (1993: 158). A taskscape is the ensemble of tasks that mutually interlock and represents the social character of the landscape, the interwoven goings-on of lives that are lived there *over time* and remains a taskscape just so long as the people dwell there. The taskscape for the bádóirí of the Galway hooker was called Loch Lurgan/Galway Bay (see [Fig. 3](#)) and being a bádóir during the turf-trade years meant practically all of the time was spent within that taskscape. The time spent sailing these waters imbued within the bádóir an intimacy with this landscape, space and place. The primary trade involved transporting turf between the bogland areas of Conamara - where there was a ready supply of this fuel source used for heating and cooking - to the Aran Islands, South Galway and Co. Clare, which has quite a different topography (see [box 1](#)).



Fig. 3. Hooker of the Bailey family, built in 1860. Image courtesy of [Petroni and Dossena \(2016\)](#).

During the working years of the Galway hooker (pre-1950s), the crew of the boat was normally two persons: the skipper or ‘bádóir’ and his mate or ‘leath-bhádóir’. It was rare to have more than two persons on-board. During the trading years there were enough boats on the water to offer employment, or at least a means to make a living to a very wide variety of people, including the boat makers and the sail-makers, the fishermen, the seaweed traders, goods carriers, pony and donkeys carriers to bring the turf from the bog to the boat and vice-versa on the receiving side, and to also carry hardware and goods likewise. The goods to ensure shop keepers throughout south west Conamara made a living were transported by the hooker, as were those goods needed by local tradespeople (builders, carpenters, etc). If one was a skilled hooker bádóir he might be contracted to skipper a boat to supply the many shops dotted about the coastline from Galway and beyond. Sometimes the boat was owned by the shop-owners themselves (merchants), and they would employ a crew to sail for them. More often, the boat was owned outright by the skipper who would have the contract to keep shop(s) supplied with whatever goods were ordered from Galway and to deliver goods wherever they were needed. A skipper would then engage his own leath-bhádóir and more often than not the position was kept within the family, thereby keeping two wage-packets coming in to the house(s). Often, it was a brother or an uncle, but always somebody who was able for the work and very skilled in some aspect of hooker sailing. It was not physically possible to sail a hooker alone and skippers never put their boats, their lives, the lives of their crew or their trade/cargo at risk by working with someone who was not fit for the job.

However, the days of trading for the Galway hooker ended in the mid-1950s with the rise of motorised vehicles and a proper road network, as well as the advent of boat engines and the availability of electricity and bottled gas. It was no longer economically viable to meet the

cost of maintaining the boats that could not generate an income. As a result most boats were left to rot and fall apart along the shores of Galway Bay. Only a few survived intact, some had engines put in and worked as fishing boats, while others were sold and scattered to Ireland's south and east coastlines and to England. The people of south west Conamara have always had a history of seasonal-emigration (and very many leave permanently), thus many of the hooker *bádóirí* left and were not around to upkeep the boats, even if they wished to. There were but a handful of notable families who retained and maintained their hooker and still do to this very day. However, it was those boats that were sold out of Conamara, namely to Dublin, that were responsible for a revival of the Galway hooker, since they continued to be repaired and maintained. It was brought back to the west coast in 1976 to an organised hooker race at Oileán Mhic Dara, Cárna (see [Fig. 2](#)). This very race has been credited with igniting the revival of racing and ultimately with the maintenance of the Galway hooker fleet itself since then ([Scott, 2004](#): 75–86). However, the decline of the Galway hooker led to the loss of a generation of *bádóirí* in Conamara. While learning to sail in the Galway hooker was no longer a common experience, the seminal race of 1976 gave people the impetus to renovate the hookers to their original sea worthy states. Many of the older hooker *bádóirí* survived through the quiet period, and upon returning to their boats they willingly shared their knowledge with others eager to learn. This knowledge was one that could not be easily translated however, since it developed through a context and ‘taskscape’ unfamiliar to the contemporary hooker *bádóirí*. There is a deeply felt sense of awe towards those old hooker *bádóirí* and an acute sensibility to the distinctive nature of their ‘embodied’ knowledges that can never be replicated. It is the embodied nature of knowledges that resonates strongly in their accounts and to which we next turn our attention.

3.2. Embodied knowledges

The descriptions and stories conveyed by the study participants demonstrate how connectivities (to things, places, people) are expressed foremost in sensory, sensuous and emotional terms and that ‘knowing’ and ‘seeing’ the world is always embodied and felt. They remind us to be attentive to the embodied nature and character of the bonds and ‘affinities’ ([Mason, 2018](#)) that emerge in our understanding of place. Some of the strongest sentiments expressed by *bádóirí* throughout this research was framed in terms of sensory or sensuous knowledge to convey a uniquely special intimate relationship with the boat. One man, now aged in his sixties, remembered the first time he stepped into the hooker, going in under the deck and sensing the smell of the oakum (the loose fibre obtained by untwisting old rope, used in caulking wooden boats, or sealing any gaps in the planking or hull). He described it as the smell *within* the hooker: “It’s a natural smell and I like it,” he said (Micil, B). He described his sensory-kinaesthetic memories as follows:

I still remember how big and deep the boats were to me when I was young and the smells of oakum and natural smells in the boats ... I loved that!!! Seeing where they lit the fire and made the tea. They'd light the fire below deck and open the scuttle to leave the smoke out. When I'd hear the blocks and pulleys as they were getting the boats ready to sail, I'd ask the teacher's permission to go to the toilet and once I rounded the corner he couldn't see me and I'd stand there staring at the boat and all the preparation activity. The size of the sail then was ‘unbelievable’ to me. I'd try to imagine what the places the boat might be going to looked like, Árainn, Cinn Mhara, East to Galway etcetera! ...

In the absence of engine driven or mechanical aids, it is the hand of the *bádóirí* that touches and feels everything on the boat. The eye-brain-hand connection to mastering technique

(Sennett, 2008) is reflected by the bádóir who says: ‘He feels first-hand the strength and power of the boat and through this, he knows the boat’ (Noel, B). The taskscape requires that the bádóir sits at the back of the boat with the tiller in one hand and the scód (line to the main sail) in the other and through these s/he can feel and hear everything that is going on around (s/he cannot see what is directly in front of the boat and this is perhaps the main reason why s/he is so dependent upon the co-boatman, the ‘leathbhádóir’ (more about this below). It is of this connection that the oldest interview (94 years) spoke when he declared of his hand, “*Oh! Bhí chuile move inti sin agamsa a dheartháir, Chuile orlach le mo lámh, bhí a fhios agam cad a bhí ag teastáil!*” translation as: ‘his hand had every move, he knew every inch of his handling that the boat needed’ (Liam, A) When sailing the hooker, there's an ongoing physical ‘conversation’ between the bádóir and the boat, and frequently, it was said of older boatmen “that they could make the boat talk to them. For most of them, this was how they were brought up and their fathers before them” (Micil, B). Another interviewee remembered a skipper who was not content until he achieved the right ‘flapping’ sound from the sails of his new hooker: “he then sported a big, satisfied smile and stated to all on board, ‘ah! she's talking to me now’” (Síle, F). Another ‘saor-bád’ (boat builder) asserted that one must always listen to the boat and “she'll tell you what's right and what's not, how she sits on the water will tell you if she's happy or not and that you must learn to communicate with her”⁴ (Cathal, B). Another described the connection as ‘almost spiritual’ where “all the worries of life are gone and you're left with the boat, the wind and the sea” (Seán, D) his father was ‘at home’ on the sea: “You could see it in his eyes, he said that there wasn't a single worry in his head when he was in the hooker” (Colm, B).

3.3. Reading nature's rhythms

Of particular note is how attuned the bádóirí were to the rhythms of nature and the reverence the younger bádóirí held for the older ones. So cued in were the senses of some of the older men that they would often say they could tell where they were positioned in the water in the pitch black of night. They had an intimate knowledge of the water currents, headlands, river inlets and bays they needed to traverse and this sensory knowledge enabled them to travel in darkness when needed (Síle, F). Every sound informed their senses and helped them to steer towards the right direction.

“even in the black of night because they'd have been there and made the same turns so often. You might be a little east or west of the exact spot, but you'd be roughly in the same place, trying to catch the same wind in the same place. This came from experience and is a skill that can't be instilled in you except through experience” (Cathal, B).

Another said of one of the older hooker bádóirí: “There was nothing about his world that he didn't know, the position of all the rocks and he could bring a boat in at night, in darkness, as well as in daylight” (Micil, B). The older ones were said to know each swell associated with the tides and the influence that the submerged rocks had on them. Two different stories were relayed of boatmen travelling to and from Galway city at night, a journey of around thirty miles. It is said that they were so familiar with the coastline that they could tell where they were by the sounds created by the tides on different rocks and while they passed different inlets and bays. This of course comes from the dependence that the hookers and other sailing craft have on the ‘time of the tides’ which displaces the clock in the everyday rhythms of sailing. On several occasions it was explained that for those dependent on the sea there is a preoccupation with the times of high and low tides that they need to be attuned with when navigating. There was much reverence evident in many of the bádóir accounts for the older

ones who were seen as remarkable for their capacity to continue to skilfully navigate the local waters even into their eighties.

One of the elder interviewees felt that hooker sailing teaches a person an acute sense of awareness, thoughtfulness and how to be reflective. He pointed out that a “hooker sailor can see weather changes coming before they happen” (Jeaic, A). Another elder *bádóir* remembered on one occasion sailing as a child with his father who commanded him to drop everything else on the boat and to take down the ‘seol-tosaigh’ (foresail) immediately. The boy was startled and a little confused as the day seemed to have perfect weather for sailing and he could sense nothing to advise otherwise. His father pointed to a darkish colour in the water some distance away and as he recalled: “sure enough about 10 min later the wind picked-up and began to gust so that it could have been dangerous had the foresail still been in position. The boat would then have had too much sail to control in that amount and type of wind” (Cóilín, A). This story was relayed as a way to illustrate the major learning opportunities that come from sailing, among which is the necessity for preparation before setting-out. This meeting of the unknown or unexpected was said to represent a great life lesson opportunity for the sailor, where one must always be a few steps ahead in one's mind in terms of destination and how to get out of potential dangers should they occur. Some *bádóirí* felt that sailing teaches this much more than in other walks of life, because on the sea one cannot simply ‘pull over’ and plan your next steps (Colm, B), (Gearóid, B): “One cannot launch and then begin preparing; everything must be planned for including the unknown” (Joe, D).

Often arising throughout the interviews was the extent to which wisdom played a key part in the social relations among the *bádóirí*. A story was told of one of the most respected and able *bádóirí* of the past generation who, after one of the major races at Kinvara, decided to return to the pier having departed for home some hours earlier. He had decided to turn back and wait until a better weather window would allow a more safe return to Conamara. As the *bádóir* recalled:

“ ‘It wasn't too bad’ he [the other *bádóirí*] said, ‘but I was afraid that if I needed to, she mightn't come-about quick enough and I wasn't going to put my crew or my boat in danger’. So there he was, perhaps the most revered hooker sailor still standing and he wasn't afraid to show to the whole hooker-sailing community that he would bow to the weather and tidal conditions. I believe that he gained even more followers by that decision” (Cóilín, A).

Another interviewee understood the power of nature and felt that “compared to the wind and sea, we are nothing, only specks” (Frank, E). He also pointed out that when an older *bádóir* spoke, you listened, because their experience of the elements made them wiser (Frank, E). The embodied knowledge and wisdom of the *bádóirí* is of course cultivated by the *local* nature of the landscape and taskscapes into which the hooker is enrolled, which we explore in the next section.

3.4. Embodied local knowledge

In the days of trading and in particular the turf-trade, where the first boat into Árainn (the Aran Islands) commanded the best price for their load, every *bádóir* had his own or his family's landmarks (termed as ‘*marcanna talúin*’). These were chosen markers such as chimney pots, telegraph poles or lines of stone walls and such, which when lined-up and intersected with each other would offer a line of safe passage to the boat through a narrow or

shallow straight between or clear of rocks and other such hazards. These markers were passed down through the generations, sometimes changing as the surrounding topography changed, but more often than not they didn't change. They represent a stored knowledge that was mentioned by all of the older interviewees, a form of vital knowledge for them and if going to sail in an area for the first time it was the first thing they said they sought to learn. One of the interviewees indicated that “fear alone wouldn't let you try a passage or short-cut until you had done it a couple of times with someone who knew their way”. Another of the interviewees related how an older sailor who often offered him much advice said: “I know every rock in Galway Bay, I hit every one them” (Colm, C). It is this type of wise advice from more experienced older people which one ignored at their peril. In one story, the *bádóirí* talks about being one of three ‘young lads’ who many years before managed to sail to the smallest of the Aran Islands, Inis Oírr. As they tied-up at the pier they were advised by an old local man that if the wind shifted to the North, North-East or East, not to let the boat there at that pier. Being young (and inexperienced) they paid no heed and set off to walk the island. Returning to the pier some time later they saw that all the villagers on the island were in the water trying to save their boat, which had now been filled with sea water. The locals had managed to rescue their boat by ‘currach’ (small local row boat) and brought it to safety on the local beach. This man said he had learned many lessons from that night and primary among them was to never again underestimate ‘local knowledge’. This story also revealed for him the esteem that the local people of the islands held for the Galway hooker, saving a boat from destruction even though they did not know any of its owners or *bádóirí*.

While the introduction of modern technology, such as GPS, may seem to add to the accuracy and navigability of the waters most were not convinced of its reliability even among the younger generation. Many of the older *bádóirí* give a ‘nod’ to technology and can see the benefits, but strongly pose the question “where are you on the day that it doesn't work?” (Seosamh, C). According to one of the younger interviewees, “even when it does work (GPS) it's not near as accurate as na Marcanna Talúin”, she said. “GPS can be up to 10 m out, while here at a Cuan Caol you have literally a few foot either side on which to get through, so GPS wouldn't do. We've got to get the old marks from the sean (old) *bádóirí* while they're still with us”, she declared. Quite apart from the fear of technology not working, one *bádóir* spoke about a renowned sailor of modern ‘round-the-world’ yachts whom he was friends with, He had a spent a season in the area sailing only in the hooker, with no use of powered technology. Thereby, everything was done by hand and eye and despite so much experience and success in sailing the modern boat, he declared to all on board the Galway Hooker, “I've just learned to sail again” (Noel, B).

Local knowledge is premised on its transmission and it was affirmed by all interviewees that the elder boatmen had no hesitation in passing on their gathered knowledge to the newer and younger members. No one claimed to have ever encountered any hesitance on the part of an older sailor to pass on their wisdom. This pragmatic ‘openness’ was justified by an elder sailor who said that they all knew they would need help when their bodies wouldn't be as fit or as strong as they once were. The point was that the more they helped and educated the younger *bádóir* now, the better that young *bádóir* would be able to help them later. He said that the older man would feel a lot safer and more comfortable in the knowledge that he knew and trusted the judgment of the young sailor, after teaching and sharing his own learning with him (Bertie, C). This type of wisdom is necessary when taking the long-term view about the need to sustain their livelihoods. There were also several stories related of the elder *bádóirí* helping out or advising the younger sailor based on their collective practical knowledge of how best to navigate with nature's elements. One described his efforts when he was younger

to refit a family boat at the pier and on one occasion a couple of older bádóirí, who would come down regularly to see his work in progress, discreetly advised “it might do no harm to put a little curve on the mullard” (heavy upright wooden posts at the stern corners and either side of the bowsprit, about which to run or secure lines). When he went to examine the mullards on the other hookers close by he realised that each one had curves on their mullards. What the younger sailor was most impressed with was not so much the advice concerning this traditional design for better navigation, but the discreet and respectful way it was communicated. Another of today's hooker bádóirí spoke of his father taking over as skipper of the family working-boat when he was just twenty years of age, which was quite young for such an onerous task. The older skippers around him “looked after him” and he always did likewise afterwards, making sure to “share his knowledge and skill with everyone and not to take anything with him to the grave” (Colm, B).

Many of the younger bádóirí said that it taught them respect for the experiences of their elders and to take their lessons on safety and respect for the elements on-board. It was appreciated that when an elder who had managed to come through more sailing hours and experiences than they themselves will ever encounter, offers advice, then one listened, respected them and took their advice without question. This brings us further to the way that knowledge is cultivated, developed and shared in a relational sense with others and the considerable interdependence needed to work in concert.

3.5. Relational knowledge and interdependence of skill

On being asked how they learned to sail the hooker or if they could name the person from whom they learned to sail the hooker all of the elder interviewees (over seventy years of age) indicated that nobody had formally taught them, and that they “just picked it up” through the practice of sailing with ‘experienced’ others. When probed further, it was very discernible that the elder interviewees would have at least witnessed or been part of the end of the trading years of the Galway hooker fleet and would have been drafted in by family, beginning with helping to load the turf, as soon as they were able to do that work. Afterwards they might have been brought on board when school was not in session, for the spin, and perhaps to help with the unloading of turf on the Aran islands. While for one of the interviewees, this happened even during the school term, because the leathbhádóir who normally worked with his father, was temporarily unavailable and the necessity to maintain the trade took precedence over school in this instance (John, B). If a boy was finished with his formal schooling, had a strong (developed) body and had expressed an interest in being part of trading life, he got the chance to become part of the crew (Liam, A). For several bádóirí, learning to sail created close engagement with their fathers and the development of strong bonds. One of the older men learned to sail from his father, who himself learned from his father and he from his. He could trace his sailing line back through four generations at least, and as soon as he was able to walk his father would take them sailing and from the age of eight or nine actually gave them the tiller. “He passed on his learning to us and I don't know if I have taught everything to my children?” (Cóilín, A).

The working arrangement of the bádóirí on board the hooker is based around two distinct sailing tasks requiring one person on the tiller and the main-sail, and another on the ‘jib’. These positions require the bádóirí to be at opposite ends of the boat at all times, that is more than twenty-foot apart. While the tiller is in the water and used to guide the craft using that constituent part, the jib, being the smallest sail on-board (triangular and at the front of the boat), is also integral to guiding the craft, using the wind to do so. The person whose hand is

on the tiller (usually the skipper) cannot see what is on/in the water directly in front of the boat and is entirely dependent on his leath-bhádóir to act as his eyes and to guide a safe passage around rocks, nets, lines and other obstacles in the sea that may be directly in front of the boat. The leath-bhádóir would also judge pathways and distances when coming into or leaving quaysides, berths and buoys. Thus, a skipper would not dare to work with someone who could not function in this position for him, even if they were ‘family’. The most experienced sailor on board always takes the tiller, even if he's not the owner of the hooker and the owner is also on-board. It was said more than once that the badóir and leath-bhádóir spent more time together than each did with their wives. Each of these two men had their own specific jobs on board, but there were also many common tasks shared between them, especially with regards to the upkeep of the boat. All of the older bádóirí had to be able to do running repairs on the boats and most could also cut and sew their own sails. They had to master these skills since they couldn't afford the cash to pay someone else, nor the time to wait on someone else to do it for them. Today's bádóirí, mostly descendants of past bádóirí openly recognise that they can never be ‘as good’ as their forefathers for the very simple reason that they are not in a position to spend near as much time in the hookers or on the water. No longer are they required to be in the boats six days a week (Sunday being the only day that trading hooker bádóirí did not work) for approximately ten or eleven months of the year (Colm, B).

3.6. Continuity and community

The continuity and transmission of knowledge across generations is a theme that resonates strongly amongst the bádóirí. One interviewee in particular (Noel, B), who is very involved in the Galway hookers today, remembers being very young and accompanying his father to all the races. On the shorelines or quays, he recalled being there amongst the old bádóirí, most of whom would have worked in the boats at some stage and being too old had left the practice to the younger crews. While he had been going to witness the races for many years before he ever set foot in a hooker, by that time he had learned all the different names, terms, winds and moves associated with the hooker. The understanding he had gained from the shoreline was then practiced and perfected once he stepped into a boat and began a period of learning-by-doing. This ‘circle of life’ with the hooker is very similar for most of the bádóirí. Another bádóir claimed to have learned all the names, practices and terms associated with the hooker from the older folk on the island, before ever sailing. While today he participates in the races, he is now beginning to appreciate the gathering of boats and bádóirí more than the competition of races (Micil, B). It was envisaged that with the passage of time this transmission to the younger generation would endure (Seán, 03E). This constant regeneration, renewal and replacement of bádóirí has always been so, as verified throughout the interviews by all respondents saying that the older bádóirí never hesitated to pass-on their hard-learned knowledge to the younger and up-coming hooker-sailors. This practice by the older ones ensured that knowledgeable help and support was always available to them from strong and able bodies during their last days of sailing (Bertie, C). Another practice within the hookers was that of handing-over the tiller to the most experienced person on-board, even if that was not the boat owner himself. Usually this would mean the oldest person amongst the crew and perhaps this practice helped these older bádóirí to know when this part of their hooker cycle was ending and when it was time to complete the circle and to take that step onto the shoreline and quays where it once began for them. This is so because no hooker bádóir would ever knowingly put his boat or his crew at risk and when it became apparent that he could no longer be the master of the boat then he stepped aside and followed the

natural order. It also ensured that the boat was in the hands of the most experienced bádóir on board (Bertie, C).

The hooker races today are critical to the maintenance of the fleet and every interviewee acknowledges that it is thanks to these events that a fleet still exists today. It was a seminal race in July 1976 that sparked a revival and mobilised people to put their family's boats back on the water once more. It was asserted that although they no longer had any livelihood stakes in the hooker, it was the sight and sounds of the preparation and sailing of the hookers that day which gave the older bádóirí and their families a glimpse of something that their hearts were still missing. Although costly to invest time and money in regenerating the boats the early races held out the prospect of earning considerable prize money. Competitors could earn £300 in the late 1970s which was a considerable amount for the time and thus the competitive racing replaced (for some at least) the earning capabilities of the trading years of the hooker (Noel B). The news of this race spread like 'tinnte sléibhe' (hill-fires) throughout Conamara, and more people repaired their family sailing craft and even more still, attended to watch the races. The numbers expanded over a short period of time and the Cumann na Húicéirí (Hooker Association) was founded. One of its successes was securing funding from the European Union Horizon programme in the 1990s to train twelve apprentice shipwrights under the mentorship of two local expert boat builders; a scheme which lasted two years but ensured that there are now a handful still practicing the trade locally.

Many of our interviewees pointed out that their main aim in participating in the regattas today was their way of honouring the generations that went before them (Noel, B; Pádraic, C; Cian, D; Oliver, D; Tomás, B). Likewise, it is described as a matter of pride that everyone involved in the hookers today contributes heavily towards their upkeep and cost of maintaining their boats, which is evident particularly among the younger generation who wish to display pride where a boat may have been in a family for many generations. [Fig. 3](#) shows a hooker built in 1860 and passed on through the generations of the same family (Bailey). The regattas involve re-enacting and performing, in today's terms, what their forefathers did and the location of these activities are almost as important as the activity itself (see [Kruckemeyer, 2002](#), p. 302; also [Pálsson, 1994](#); [Basso, 1996](#)) (see [Fig. 4](#) on re-enactment of turf loading at the quayside; Image courtesy of [Petroni and Dossena \(2016\)](#) 'Húicéirí', Copyright).



Fig. 4. Re-enactment of turf loading at the quayside; Image courtesy of Petroni and Dossena (2016).

The hooker community of today are acutely aware that they have been ‘very lucky’ to come through that prolonged period of inactivity which almost cost them dearly. They acknowledge that the culture and tradition of hooker sailing had been almost lost forever and that its revival was sparked by a boat that returned from outside of Conamara. There is an acute awareness that such ‘traditions’ are fragile and vulnerable. Although many older hooker *bádóiri* feel they cannot enjoy the races/regattas and its rules and competition, they feel a strong urge to support them and thereby encourage the preservation and promotion of the traditional culture of hooker sailing. Many of the older hooker men denied much interest in the races, but express their love for the conviviality and sociality that goes with the community-making practices (Neal and Walters, 2008) that surround the races. They enjoy being in the company of the other boats and *bádóirí* (see Fig. 4 which shows several adults and a child on board as they sail close to the shoreline). Tellingly, one of those elders, who was also one of the last to be involved in the turf trade when he was a young boy alongside his father, said that he also remembers his father not being interested in the races either. He now prefers to take the boat to the best spots in the days before the races, when he can go at whatever time the tide allows. He enjoys being able to go as fast or slow as the elements allow and enjoy the conviviality with other boats who might be going to the same place also (John, B). A highlight for another man is the gathering of sailors in the pub after the race: “During the race everyone is watching each other, but once the race is finished, it’s everyone into the pub and meeting old and making new friends” (Frank, D). However, there is a strong competitive element attached to hooker sailing in the form of races, which is a key attraction for some but not others. One of the younger interviewees claimed “it is natural for people to try and best each other; people like competition”, and it reminds everyone that “before the races the number of sailing boats had not alone fallen, but were in fact almost totally gone”

(Seán, E). All agreed that without the race and competition element, the survival of the hooker would be seriously undermined. With the races, there is also a considerable degree of background organisation involved in the form of voluntary committee work throughout the year, including fund-raising in the community and among local businesses. It was acknowledged among those involved that there are challenges associated with organising the competitions, including maintaining the interest and benefits for local people and tourists. There appears to be an ongoing debate as to how best to develop and sustain the races – in terms of scheduling, number of races, entertainment, etc - so that the wider local community can enjoy and benefit socially and economically from these events. There are also differences of view, beyond the scope of this paper, about changes in boat design and maintaining the original features of the hooker. While our study does not include the perspective of the wider local community not involved in sailing, there are certainly some wider benefits for local businesses such as pubs, shops, and local hotels which accommodate those attending races or other community events. At one annual event called the ‘saint's pattern day’ (pilgrimage day), the historic island of Saint MacDara attracts hundreds of people, who travel by boat and ferry to reach the island. Many emigrants from the area coincide their annual holiday with the event, bringing cousins from America, England and other places with them. There are also other examples of successful events held over the years, which involved organising parades, concerts and other entertainment for the local community.

4. Discussion

As recent scholarship within cultural geographies of the sea has begun to acknowledge, there are distinctive ‘embodied spatialities of being’ ([Couper, 2018](#)) that are quite different from terrestrial life. What is particularly distinctive about communities that have relied upon the sea is the nature of ‘taskscape’ and to this end we have attempted to trace - through these narratives across older and younger generations of *bádóirí* - how a region and its everyday life were assembled relationally, with the hooker as a central actant. As this glimpse into the world of traditionally crafted vessels illustrates, the hookers were vital to assembling life in coastal rural communities at a particular period of time and remain integrally part of the living heritage of the region. While these accounts are drawn from narratives about a way of life long since passed, the *living tradition* of sailing the hooker today cannot be viewed outside of its historical moorings. We have sought to emphasise and place a greater spotlight on the ‘embodied knowledges’ through which this was performed and how such an approach to knowledge offers a relational view through which bodies, technologies, mobilities and habituations together constitute awareness and being-in-the-world. In the context of places that have primarily relied on the sea and its navigation, such embodied knowledges offer a window to their distinctive character. Within the narratives, what is particularly striking is how attuned many are to the limited sense of agency they hold as humans when viewed as separate from nature and the non-human materiality that made life possible in such places. This affinity with the rhythms of nature and recognition that it “has its own elemental agenda and temporality” ([Mason, 2018](#): 199) meant a sense of being-in-the-world and knowledge that could not be detached from the distinctive human-nonhuman-nature relations that developed over time.

While these times are long past, it is one of our arguments that we cannot fully appreciate how contemporary places, spaces and the experience of ‘community’ and ‘tradition’ are rendered meaningful unless we understand the nature of such connections and their relational dimensions across time. The knowledge, life and rhythms inhering in and surrounding the hooker remains deep within the ‘practical and discursive consciousness’ ([Giddens \(1984\)](#) of

those who witnessed it and those who sail the hookers today; all of whom were reared on stories of great sailing feats and the generations that went before them. Although the hooker-trader taskscape and particular 'way-of-life' it facilitated are long gone, we also want to emphasise here the continuity and significance of such 'traditions' in thinking about 'community as culture' ([Blokland, 2017](#)). We take tradition to mean that which forms enduring features in the "sociobiographical memory" of a place and its people ([Olick and Robbins, 1998](#): 123; see also [Degnen, 2016](#)). Traditions can be read in a community sense through the 'boundaries' and boundary-making that are part of how we distinguish ourselves from others and how we achieve social identification. These boundaries can be reflected in the places that have meaning for people, the shared conditions of work and life, the symbols they share, the particular forms of embodied knowledge and discourses that operate within those boundaries and notably the objects and actants through which these are performed. As with any tradition there is a definitive need for the 'handing down' or 'passing on' of distinct idioms, skills, knowledge, practices and actants which are then subject to individual interpretation, creativity and meaning. As we can see from the narratives, there remains a sense of awe and reverence for those previous generations whose navigation skill and embodied knowledges enabled dwelling long before roads and land based transport made life more terrestrial driven. The stories that the bádóirí continue to circulate are a crucial form of 'memory talk' ([Degnen, 2005](#)) which signifies the importance of such stories and talk - of local bádóirí, their achievements, generosity and wisdom, local land and sea markers, boat makers and their distinctive styles, renowned families - to making sense of the present. Such narratives and discourse ([Peace, 2001](#)) are means for creating community in a symbolic way, drawing on stocks of knowledge that locate individuals, boats, sites, social practices, and events of the past and present. The capacity to contribute and understand the import of such narrative construction can be a source of community identification and attachment ([Peace, 2001](#)), in ways often unfamiliar to the outside observer.

In our study, we also find resonance with [Bennett's \(2014\)](#) deployment of Mauss's 'gift' concept where meaningful places and material objects instil a sense of moral obligation among the present generation to preserve and nurture the memory and usage of those places/material objects, thereby affirming a sense of deep-seated belonging. For Bennett, "history moves through the lives of people and places; it is not stuck in the past but is constantly brought into the present, inherent in the flow of life of people and things, material objects, and places" (2015: 669-70). Today, hooker sailing is entirely about pleasure, conviviality and keeping the links with the past alive and it is through these "material activities and everyday labours" ([Neal and Walters, 2008](#): 282) that ensure the continuity of the hooker in today's world. There is an acute awareness that while today's bádóirí can never be as attuned to the rhythms of the hooker and nature itself, there is a sensibility among those involved to maintain and sustain the legacy through competition and community events, such as races, or by simply continuing to sail as close as possible to how their forefathers did. There are, nonetheless, differences of view among bádóirí about how well the traditional design of the boats is being adhered to in the contemporary period. Without the revival of interest and concern for the hooker starting in the 1970s and maintained through the efforts of local voluntary organising committees, knowledge of hooker sailing and building would have been effectively lost. While the social and convivial dimension of sailing is the strongest attraction for many, all participants felt that the contemporary competitive aspect of races and regattas are needed to maintain the interest and enthusiasm of younger generations. While our study did not explore its contemporary significance among the wider local community, it is evident that such community events provide some local economic spin-offs, albeit there is debate as to how this might be better developed and sustained throughout the region. Our

speculation though is that such events also serve to keep the hooker alive in the wider consciousness of local people, many of whose ancestors' lives/livelihoods are likely to have been supported in some direct or indirect way. While more research is needed on this aspect, such competitive and celebratory social events (and the preparation behind these) in our view afford opportunities to connect people with community tradition and sense of place distinctiveness.

5. Conclusion

In summary, our interviews with those involved with the traditional 'hooker' sailing boat reveal the central role of the boat in the history of coastal community life and the intimate relationship *bádóirí* had with their boats and environments. We have shown the extent to which their knowledge was embodied through prolonged interaction with a range of nonhuman elements - including the boat's physical structure and various parts, local topography, tides, rocks, piers, roads and weather – as well as other *bádóirí* with whom they sailed and learned their craft. In charting the historically vital role of the hooker and the *bádóirí* embodied knowledge to dwelling in south west Conamara, we have shown to some extent the distinct 'rhythmpatterns' and 'rhythmic practices of place' ([Jones, 2011](#)) of coastal communities over much of their history. Among today's *bádóirí*, there is a deep sense of awe and reverence for those who came before them and their narratives are filled with stories, memories and valuable life lessons that continue to influence how they see themselves and their communities today. A key finding is that keeping the tradition alive is a responsibility all have felt and has ensured the hooker's survival to this day. Without the transmission of practical knowledge across and within generations and the ongoing active engagement with hooker boats, this traditional craft boat would have certainly gone into terminal decline. We have also shown that while the contemporary context of hooker sailing is much different, including its competitive aspect, it remains a passionate source of pleasure, and sometimes disagreement, in people's everyday lives.

What we hope to extrapolate from this paper for a wider rural studies audience is the need for greater attentiveness to those rural places, traditions and knowledges where the sea rather than land has occupied a more dominant presence in the lives and imaginations of people. Likewise, we would wish to add to those studies that have foregrounded the interplay of actants and their vital role in co-constituting the agency and knowledge of embodied actors. Through our narratives we have sought to understand that what constitutes the rural and the formation of communities requires making sense of the deep human-nonhuman-nature relations and continuities over time.

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[1](#)

We use the Gaelic (Irish language) spelling ‘Conamara’ but it is also commonly spelled ‘Connemara’.

[2](#)

Throughout the paper we mostly use the term bádóir (singular for ‘boatman’) and bádóirí (plural ‘boatmen’), which is the Gaelic (Irish language) term used by the interviewees and conveys a stronger sense of connection to the boat than the term ‘sailor’.

[3](#)

Another large body of literature has emerged also on the well-being and health qualities of blue space, including swimming (see most recently [Foley et al., 2019](#)).

[4](#)

The interviewees always talk about their boats in feminine terms as ‘she’.