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## **The stained and bloodied cloths of Ireland**

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## **Oestrogen Rising 2016: Ireland's stained and bloodied cloths**

### **Abstract**

A weaver, seamstress, laundress and artist, in this essay I will spin a yarn, tangle a web, and construct a text(ile) of the inter-weave of narrative and identity that I define as my intellectual, textual, somatic and material/visual practice obsessions. My work explores “the places in-between” in the entanglements of Irish and Northern Irish gender and identity, and in the abject fabrics of death and of desire. As an Irish feminist, sense-making of the complexities, conundrums, challenges and contradictions of my land, my cloth, my body and my culture owes much to Irish women before me who fought for female suffrage, and Irish women now – North and South of the border that divides the island of Ireland – who still struggle for equality of citizenship, social justice, human rights, and full reproductive autonomy. My contention is that when we accept that Ireland herself is a many-layered cloth, a stained and bloodied cloth, a cloth marked irreversibly by history, conflict, denial and abuse, stained by its own repression, marked through denial of *all* its people's rights and needs, and bloodied by its greatest export, the haemorrhage of its people, then – polemical, didactic or reflective, with more compassion, empathy, humility and heart – we just might make peace with our past.

### **Keywords**

Ireland - cloth - stain - blood - gender - identity - culture - justice - abjection

## **Oestrogen Rising 2016: Ireland's stained and bloodied cloths**

As a weaver by trade and training, a seamstress and laundress by design, an artist in text and textiles by craft, I will spin a yarn, tangle a web, and construct a text(ile) of the inter-weave of narrative and identity that I define as my intellectual, textual, somatic and material/visual practice obsessions. My work explores “the places in-between” in the entanglements of Irish and Northern Irish gender and identity, and in the abject fabrics of death and of desire. This essay frames work developing in the centenary year of Ireland's Easter rising of 2016, which led to the partition of Ireland, the establishment of an independent (of British rule) Republic of Ireland, and the creation of Northern Ireland (within the United Kingdom).

As an Irish feminist, sense-making of the complexities, conundrums, challenges and contradictions of my land, my cloth, my body and my culture owes much to Irish women before me who fought for female suffrage, and Irish women now – north and south of the border that

divides the island of Ireland – who still struggle for equality of citizenship, social justice, human rights, and full reproductive autonomy. In my lifetime, the so-called Troubles (circa 1968-98) in Northern Ireland have dominated human rights and responsibilities discourse, while normative social conservatism across the whole island of Ireland has seen a series of significant challenges and changes over a similar period to the Troubles. An increasing re-focus on northern and southern female reproductive rights is growing in intensity in what I have termed Ireland's *Oestrogen Rising 2016*.

This text presents a material culture meditation on national identit(ies) in the whole island of Ireland, and the operation in those contested, mythologised and traumatised identities in female (and other 'feminised', for which read marginalised or disempowered) bodies. It furthermore exposes my textile and visual practice reflecting a recent past and proposing a necessary scrutiny – not of romantic home-crafts, or industrial linen/shirt production – but of the sectarianism, superstition and sexual repression that has meant that Irish bogland's liquid, liminal, visceral, and even libidinous materiality most clearly represents the land, its sexual politics, and its social culture. Running through the work is reference to fabric, of the national body and its citizens, and the repetitive rituals of staining, washing, laundering, stitching and ironing associated with fabric, its preservation or protection, and with maternity, mourning and memory.

This "taking care" work is the traditional domain of women in Ireland, where the Constitution of Ireland guarantees women equal citizenship, but defines women's 'life within the home' and determines that 'mothers shall not...neglect...their duties in the home' (1937). In contrast to the definitive constitutional placement of women in the domestic sphere, the tradition of paternal absence in Ireland – through neglect, alcoholism or emigration – is much less discussed. My contention is that if we consider Ireland as a many-layered cloth, a stained and bloodied cloth, a cloth marked irreversibly by history, conflict, denial and abuse, stained by repression, marked through denial of *all* its people's rights and needs, and bloodied by its greatest export, the haemorrhage of its people, then – polemical, didactic or reflective, with more compassion, empathy, humility and heart – we just might make peace with our past and more importantly construct a future in modernity.

### **Irish, Northern Irish, and from the North of Ireland**

I am Irish, Northern Irish, and from the North of Ireland. Each fragment of my national multi-identity is contested, fragmented, marginal and contingent. Yet the conservative canon of Irish, Northern Irish and North of Ireland textile culture suggests a confident and romantic discourse, valorizing the feminine and domestic industry of, for example, white-work stitches and sprigged embroidery, drawn thread and patchwork quilting, crochet and lace-making, flax threading and linen weaving. Of the twin political traditions in my land – Irish Republicanism and Ulster Unionism – dominant Unionist

Loyalism's domineering textile signifiers are the banners, flags and sashes that assert the history, religion and ideology of that fraternity in a vibrant and unambiguous material culture that is designed to maintain an absolutist Protestant legacy of loyalty to the British Crown. Various decorative, provocative, offensive and beautiful, these objects function as apotropaic or talismanic textiles (Eastop, 2006, 239) apparently protecting Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom from the perceived malevolence of Catholic Republicanism and Irish Nationalism. These too have their own artifact-rich, symbolically encoded and embodied textile traditions, witnessed in other flags and embroidered emblems, and in particular woven and knitted concepts of national dress, and it is clear that in a highly charged political culture, cloth is never only cloth.

My own inadvertent challenge to Loyalism's identity happened in 1987 when I attempted to cross a road between banners and bands at a Belfast Loyalist parade. Wrestled to the ground by four men, I was hurled back to the side of the road from whence I came, to wait for the end of the parade. The authority of those banners, and right of way of their bearers, was not up for crossing. The hot pizza I was carrying burst its bag, and impregnated itself deep into the weave of my dress, impressing its fierce heat onto my stomach, my skin branded with an unmistakable message from those powerful textiles – that of the inalienable, sacred and unapologetic right of way of Loyalism's dominant cultural force. The Red Hand of Ulster said NO. My masochism was silence, my body-memory was abjection, and my senses heightened by the clarity of my awareness that everyday, somatic *and* ceremonial textiles – my dress, my body and those banners – construct and negotiate the cultural baggage we carry bundled and strapped to our souls (Layne, 2001, 77).

When you are young, significant moments in cultural history align with your own important timeline, place names resonate with where you live, and events echo with what is happening in your life. That is youth's self-protecting narcissism. In hindsight and from a distance, it is possible to see how inured my generation was to what was termed 'an acceptable level of violence' in Northern Ireland (Maudling, 1971; Note 1), and how normal it all felt. Although the product of culturally tense, and ultimately unsuccessful "mixed" Catholic-Protestant marriage, my nurture and influence was of Protestant traditionalism, control and diligence. I was taught early the stigma of free expression and the exercise of self-denial and self-repression, the essence of sober, tight-lipped and entrenched West Belfast Presbyterianism: "whatever you say, say nothing". Heaney noted the tightly bound gag of our culture: 'Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared with us', he wrote of the citizens of Northern Ireland, a 'land of password, handgrip, wink and nod / Of open minds as open as a trap...' (Heaney, 1975, 51-54), and I captured in materials mouths saying nothing: smothering speech or stifling sobs (Harper, *Woman Mouth Stapled Shut* 1988-90).

Men, women, children, the unborn; Catholics and Protestants; Republican Nationalists and Loyalist Unionists; those in military, police and paramilitary uniforms, those in civilian clothes, in Northern

Ireland and over here on the “mainland” seemed to be “legitimate targets” for somebody. Escalation of violence in the 1970s and 1980s, then the slow hungered-for turn towards partial-then-actual ceasefires in the early 1990s; the beginning of arms decommissioning; stop-start cessation of violence; Northern Ireland’s fragile peace holds on by threads only today, and sorrow and suffering

### Figure 1

In that time and place, I maintained a visual art practice of large-scale constructed forms, drawing and reliefs emergent from a woven textile practice related to the land I was brought up in, the bog landscape of County Derry. Not wanting to look *directly* at the murder, martyrdom and misery of the violently conflicted society around me, as some – predominantly male – artists in the North seemed able to, I created works that referenced older bodies, those Bronze and Iron Age bog cadavers – most likely sacrificed or executed – of Irish Cashel Man, English Lindow Man, German Windeby Woman, Danish Tollund Man and the rest. Ritualized and preserved in the acidic, anaerobic, cold and wet peat lands of Ireland and Northern Europe, each one seeming – as Heaney said – as if ‘he had been poured in tar, he lies on a pillow of turf and seems to weep the black river of himself...bruised like a forceps baby...beauty and atrocity...each hooded victim, slashed and dumped’ (Heaney, 1975, 28-29).

Brian McAvera referred at the time to some Northern Irish artists’ tendency ‘towards oblique and layered responses’ to the Northern conflict (McAvera, 1990, 21). These ancient bog people resonated for me with my land’s collective victims, allowing exposure of what Gemma Tipton called an ‘inherent tension in the images of female sexuality and devotion...[and the]... tragic, futile violence behind bloody human sacrifice in the name of a land and a civilization that is not always civilized’ [Tipton, 1993, 56]. In my mind’s eye I saw *contemporary* bodies in the bogs, the infamous “Disappeared” of Northern Ireland’s Troubles, several now exhumed years after their murders from their bogland burial places. The significance of bog, as an otherworldly place between solid and liquid, history and contemporary, reality and mythology, the vital body and the cold corpse, echoed the place of my birth, my land - neither wholly Irish nor wholly British, but liminal, unknowable, fearful and afraid. Taken further, bog floated in my consciousness as symptomatic of a feminine condition of marginality, contingency, and a perplexing potent impotency. I wrote at the time of the bog landscape that is the fabric of my land:

...its folds, faults, intrusions, rifts and crevices of sod and clod, hidden places, wombs and layers, is certainly female, producing life, growth and eventually decay in the continuous cycle of life and death. The image of people being swallowed into the black bog ditches and being held there preserved is a vivid one...Bog symbolizes the raw potency of our sexual energy, one of the most basic motivating factors for our actions. Procreative and vital, it is also treacherous and consuming... Bog is built by and

rejuvenated by death and decay, pushing new life to the surface while simultaneously drawing in and digesting the old (Harper, 1996, 18).

Complex readings of land, culture and gender in my work were underway. Liam Kelly wrote of my practice as a 'cultural mapping of the psychic landscape', with land as 'a vehicle to explore more personal emotions and associations' (Kelly, 1996, 55). In my *Conceptua Immaculata* installation (1990), Kelly also recognized 'a message to man as wayward patriarch, with a gold nugget phallic symbol placed appropriately' (Kelly, 1996, 46), and from here I trace the beginning of a more overt personal/political dimension supplementing the virgin/victim with the "toothed vagina" of a clearly feminist practice.

Kelly's 'cultural mapping' also took the form of material and physical work constructed, woven, stitched out on the bog landscape itself, that pre-empted later performance work in a very different urban register. For the Sculptors' Society of Ireland *Bogland Symposium* (1990), I created a site-specific ritual to *Nerthus*, Northern European tribe goddess of fertility documented by Tacitus, first century AD Roman historian, in his *Germania* treatise of 98CE. Tacitus noted too the ritual drowning in bogs of the slaves who washed the sacred cart and cloths used for veneration of this deity. My own words are salutary: I recognized 'that, had I lived in Iron Age time, [these] might have been my father, sister, lover, child or even myself. I might even have been their killer' (McAvera, 1990, 17) and I recognized the ritual repetition of staining, washing and death as a mantra in Irish contemporary culture.

Both Tacitus and the modern archaeologist P.V. Glob recorded that many of the Bronze and Iron Age bog bodies were accompanied by votive symbolic objects or execution devices; many were killed using multiple means (stabbed, bludgeoned, strangled, drowned, beheaded); many were pinned down in bog pools with forked sticks, seemingly arranged in foetal formation or with entrails drawn through their skin; many appearing to have been ritualistically tortured before death or maimed afterwards (Glob, 1969). Through a personal politics of despair at the trauma and horror endemic in Northern Ireland at that time, I articulated my grief in the weaving of material codes via these ancient ancestors. These works were clearly articulations of my land as womb and tomb, my culture as devouring and voracious, my body as a ravenous *vagina dentata*, *Máthair Eire*, a *Síla-na-gig*; spawning and interring, nurturing and incarcerating, exposing and castigating, goddess of martyrdom and of blood sacrifice, emblematic of sacred repression and the pious humility of acceptance (Harper, *Síle on her haunches* 1990). But these also articulated the multiple confusions of identity that women in contemporary end of twentieth century Ireland were grappling with, those of – virgin, vessel, mother, martyr, whore, castrator, and harbinger of death, the banshee.

## Figure 2

Kelly too remarked on the ‘dangerous territories...and trapped nerves’ my work was starting to allude to, aware of my multi-articulations of women as protectors and providers, while also sacrificial victims, predatory and sexual manipulators, mobilizing power as a fatal attraction (Kelly, 1995, unpaginated). This was turning visceral and sexual, with ‘strong flesh...blood-gorged’ works like *That Treacherous Lecherous One* (1990) and *The Come On Smile* (1990) (Leyton, 1996, 12), exposing ‘conflict between pleasure and pain, desire and disappointment’ (Harper, *Ourselves Alone*, 1990) (Darke, 1995, 41).

### Figure 3

#### Women to Blame

As Northern Ireland’s Troubles played out their relentless repetition of devastation, suffering, atrocity and execution, the social context of the island of Ireland in the last decade of the twentieth century was under enormous pressure too. For Northern Irish women, whose rights were obscured by the dominant discourse of the sectarian struggle in the North, who sought an “alternative Ulster” no longer repressed by the conservative morality of Church(es) and State, and who labored in an impoverished morality and sexuality debate north of Ireland’s border, the appointment of Ireland’s first female President in 1990, the radical feminist Mary Robinson was an extraordinary and transformative moment.

A new social and feminist politics had begun to question the Republic of Ireland’s constitutional and governmental bans on divorce, contraception, abortion and homosexuality. The Irish Republic (the South of Ireland) finally decriminalized homosexuality in 1993 (eleven years after decriminalization in Northern Ireland, and twenty-three years after the rest of the UK, which includes Northern Ireland). The Irish Republic finally and fully abolished restrictions on contraceptive sale and information in 1993, and finally legalized divorce in 1995 – an opportunity for a “second chance”, rather than the dissolution of the iconic Irish family as the campaign put it. In 2015, the Irish Republic legalized same-sex marriage, marking a significant moment of enlightenment (although Belfast, Northern Ireland was where the first civil partnership in the UK was registered, there remains a ban on same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland, now the only place in the UK *and* Ireland where this equality of citizenship is not permitted).

The Ireland of the 1980s and early 1990s was also deeply affected by growing revelation of the extensive and systemic sexual, emotional and physical abuse of thousands of children by clergy, in Church-run industrial schools, orphanages, and in the infamous Magdalene laundries and Bethany Homes (Note 3). Many of these institutions were established to house in the main “illegitimate”

children, their unmarried mothers, or so-called “promiscuous and precocious” girls, some themselves the victims of rape and incest. The last Irish Magdalene laundry was closed in Dublin in 1996, but from the mid-eighteenth century thousands of women and girls had lived, worked unpaid, and had “disappeared” in these institutions, incarcerated and abused, lives spent washing stains from the cloths of ecclesiastical, governmental, civic and commercial bodies throughout Ireland (Cooper, 2013, Web).

Stains on cloth and clothes are powerful symbols that I will return to later, but the prevailing culture of conservative sexual morality, both in Catholic Ireland, and in the Protestantism more prevalent north of the Irish border, was the backdrop to my experience as a teenager in the 1980s. On 31 January 1984, a fifteen-year-old girl called Ann Lovett – three years my junior – slipped out of school to give birth to a little boy beside a Virgin Mary grotto in the Irish midlands (Gartland, 2014, Web). Wrapped in her coat, his umbilical cord cut by scissors she had brought with her, the baby was dead or had died shortly after birth. Found by school friends crying and bleeding beside his body, Ann died later that day. Her community, clergy and family purported to have no knowledge of her pregnancy, but had clearly played their parochial roles in a wilful national prejudice concerning the “illegitimate” consequences of sex.

In the same year of 1984, the Kerry Babies scandal brought unmarried motherhood, double infanticide, extra-marital sex, and the ethical treatment of a woman in distress further into an increasingly uncomfortable Irish media spotlight (Gartland, 2014, Web). The wider discourse on Irish women’s rights, sexuality, maternal and reproductive autonomy, and Ireland’s cultural, judicial and legal misogyny was taken up by activists and campaigners, including Irish journalist, playwright, civil rights campaigner and feminist Nell McCafferty who wrote of Irish society’s fundamental and persistent need to find “a woman to blame” (McCafferty, 1985).

Cultural silence in my environment was broken by other voices beginning to whisper, and even to begin to speak (Note 4). Derry filmmaker Margo Harkin’s direction of *Hush-a-Bye Baby* (1990), set in Derry in 1984, is an example of a developing, painful, national conversation about sexuality and women’s rights in Ireland. The *Hush-a-Bye Baby* film ‘was directly influenced by the moral panic which beset Ireland during the first abortion referendum in Ireland in 1983’ (Besom Productions, Web). The prevailing message for young women in the Ireland and Northern Ireland of the 1980s, before and since, was that female sexuality was dangerous; female desire or bodily pleasure was taboo; female bodies were potentially incendiary, volatile and inadvertently provocative; sexual transgression of narrow hetero-normative behavioral codes enshrined in constitution, legislation and convention was the way to self-inflicted social and moral damnation.

In time, and through art, I would come to reflect on the harshness of my land and the culture that

allowed that cold dead newborn on the ice and his pitiful haemorrhaging child-mother, a land and culture that Enda Kenny, current Irish Taoiseach / Prime Minister, referred to as a ‘cruel, pitiless Ireland distinctly lacking in a quality of mercy...judgmental, intolerant, petty and prim...that welcomed the compliant, obedient and lucky “us” and banished the more problematic, spirited or unlucky “them”’ (*In full*, 2013, Web).

Stories of cruelty and intolerance have continued to surface since, and instances persist today. One of the most controversial social, legal and moral battles in Ireland was in 1992, when a fourteen-year-old Irish girl, abused over two years, was raped and made pregnant by her neighbour. With termination illegal in Ireland and Northern Ireland, the girl and her family sought this in London, but were forbidden to leave Ireland by a 1983 Constitutional Amendment, which placed foetal right to life as equal to that of the mother, regardless of circumstances. In fact, they had already travelled, but immediately returned by order of the Irish Attorney General. Ailbhe Smyth, then of University College Dublin, remembers the sense of shock and fury about the Republic’s message to its female citizens: ‘I can’t remember a time when there was such a spontaneous outburst of absolute rage’ (Sheridan, 2012, Web). The Supreme Court of Ireland overturned the travel ban some weeks later on the grounds that the child’s suicide risk was deemed extreme, and should suicide have happened this would have killed both the – by now more developed – foetus and its increasingly distressed mother. The girl in fact spontaneously miscarried on arrival in England, and before her termination.

Just as distressing was use of a barbaric birth procedure in Ireland from 1944 until at least 1984, still used today in developing countries by Irish medical missionaries (RTE, 2010). I sat at a kitchen table with a number of women at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Ireland, just after the news of this scandal broke, and the night grew long with oral testimonies of this and related cruelties to women, mothers and children in an Ireland purporting to love the family. Symphysiotomy is the non-consensual splitting apart, by circular or hack saw, of around 1500 Irish women’s pelvises – some in women as young as 14 – during labour, risking incontinence, chronic pain, walking difficulties, mental trauma, and even family breakdown. Alternative Caesarian birth was avoided to ensure women – pelvises strapped up again – would be able to carry unlimited pregnancies afterwards, and Ireland’s ideological restrictions on artificial contraception, cultural avoidance of sterilisation, and only limited use of so-called “compassionate hysterectomy” well into the 1980s encouraged its practice.

Sinead O’Carroll has published excerpts from a number of the testimonies from survivors of symphysiotomies in Ireland (O’Carroll, 2014, Web), the following being typical:

I just remember being brought into a theatre and the place was packed with people...I was screaming and being restrained. I couldn’t see much except for them sawing. It was excruciating pain, I was just 27 and I was butchered (Philomena).

I was screaming. It's not working [the anaesthetic] I said, I can feel everything...I saw him go and take out a proper hacksaw, like a wood saw...a half-circle with a straight blade and a handle...The blood shot up to the ceiling, up onto his glasses, all over the nurses. Then he gets something like a solder iron and puts it on me, and stopped the bleeding...He put the two bones together, there was a burning pain (Cora).

I was nervous over the years, always conscious of the need not to break that bone again. Your own relationship with your husband was at risk...running to the toilet all the time...I pay for the incontinence pads myself (Vera).

[At home] the wound was discharging; there was a terrible smell. I dosed it with Dettol...There was no binding of the pelvis...I had a bad prolapse of the womb after. I am completely incontinent today (Kathleen).

Irish Sinn Féin politician Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin called the 'infliction of symphysiotomy on women in Ireland...a clinical scandal on a par with the clerical scandals we have seen exposed in the past two decades' (Ó Caoláin, 2012), and in 2014 the United Nations Committee on Human Rights called for an Irish government investigation into what they asserted was public policy of torture, cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment contrary to human rights. Around 300 survivors of this dreadful mass medical experiment are currently campaigning for Irish state recognition and restitution.

The *Women to Blame* multi-media exhibition in Dublin's Temple Bar, in Autumn 2014, documented the decades since the 1983 Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution, which further tightened the Irish foetal right to be *born* as *equal* to the mother's right to life – even if the foetus is already dead, dying, malformed, unviable, or the product of rape or incest. Arguably as a consequence of the Eighth Amendment, Galway woman Savita Halappanavar's prolonged miscarriage in 2012 was allowed to continue without abortive intervention, allowing consequent development of fatal septic shock for the mother (Holland, 2012, Web). Medical termination of this wanted but unsalvageable foetus would likely have averted Savita's death, but uncertainty and contention still prevail in Ireland on action in miscarriage, and delay saw "nature taking its course" for both mother and foetus. The Irish referendum of 1992 clarified the right to information on and travel to the UK for termination, but determination of risk to maternal versus foetal life remains precarious for medical practitioners in Ireland. Perverse outcomes of this fuzzy logic include the 2014 case of a brain-dead 15-week pregnant woman (Mac Cormaic, 2014, Web). Although the foetus was well below the gestational age for independent viability, the mother was kept on life support for almost four weeks in 2014, when there was no genuine prospect of a live birth. Prolonged judicial deliberation was permitted on whether it was legal to withdraw support to what was – dreadfully – a corpse and a pitifully unviable foetus.

This was eventually granted, to the relief of the women's partner and parents, but no action has yet been initiated to discuss repeal of the Eighth Amendment and pressure grows from Irish citizens at home and abroad for repeal of the vexed Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution.

Approximately 4,500 women a year are known to travel to Britain from the whole island of Ireland for terminations (O'Carroll, 2012, Web). This statistic includes Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom, but the *UK Abortion Act* of 1967 does not extend to Northern Ireland, where the *Offences Against the Person Act* of 1861 criminalizes intention to procure miscarriage with punishment up to 'penal servitude for life' (Offences, 1861). In February 2016, the Northern Ireland Assembly voted against legalising abortion even in fatal foetal abnormality cases. In such instances, medical diagnosis is that the foetus will die either in the womb or shortly after birth, but termination in these sorry cases is not accepted within Northern Ireland. In April 2016, a Northern Irish woman who took abortion pills in Belfast to terminate a pregnancy when she was 19 was given a three-month suspended prison sentence, and a criminal record for life, and in spite of protests there appears to be no change in the immediate future for Northern Ireland's harshest criminal penalty for abortion in Europe (Gentleman, 2016, Web). North and south of the Irish border, it seems women are still to blame.

Catherine Nash wrote that my visual practice was concerned with the 'immobilising and vulnerable nature of motherhood... expressing feminine solidarity, and feminist spirituality and resilience... [recognising] a deep vein of guilt running through Irish society for women... [with] dichotomised versions of femininity, as nurturing and treacherous...' (Nash, 1995, unpaginated). She recognised that in struggling to make sense of this, I was working in the "gaps between" the false dualisms of social and biological, cultural and natural "Irish womanhood". Nash could see that the bog landscape 'did not provide an over-arching metaphor for national identity, but rather a way of working through the pain and pleasures of human relationships in a local context, informed by the specific iconographical and social positions of women in Ireland' (Nash, 1995, unpaginated). And for her, my works were 'not emblematic of a deep, whole national or individual identity once uncovered', but rather evidence of a composite national culture, as hybrid and layered as the land itself.

#### **Figure 4**

*The Big Red* (1994) was a large-scale, conceptually significant and cathartic work for my overall practice. Commissioned originally by Galway Arts Centre, it was shown in Dublin and Belfast, before being purchased and gifted to Belfast City Council for installation in the newly opened Waterfront Hall, Belfast, where it continues to hang. Aidan Dunne captured the essence of this work, which addressed the less predominantly discussed issues of paternal absence in a castrated, colonised and infantilised culture that fails to chastise masculine irresponsibility:

...a huge, livid wall of twining, twisting red fabrics, so all-enveloping that it short-circuits any considered response...The Big Red shrouds an entire wall with masses of ragged, falling fabric strands of different textures and densities, but all dyed red. The effect is of a sanguinary waterfall which bleeds into a thick carpet of fleece that lines the floor and fills the room with a warm, heady animal odour...(Dunne, 1994).

As much menstrual, as wounded, as abject, as birth-bloody, this piece troubles identification and disallows singularity in interpretation. But the North was lurching towards a peace process, and the times were changing.

I completed a year's residency at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (1995-96), and began to experiment in practice with a new, less essentialist, less rigidly "Irish / Northern Irish" approach to sex, gender and sexuality. My land and culture mythologises and celebrates an ideal of maternity – the combination of the ideal mother and the ideal foetus – *in extremis*. The notion of land enshrined as woman extends this, and Irish nationhood is heavily associated and constitutionally inscribed by an essentialist idea of female destiny as motherhood: the banned documentary, *Mother Ireland* exemplifies the powerful historical and allegorical representation of Ireland as a woman, and linkage of nationalism and feminism (Derry Film and Video Collective, 1988, Web). Ireland's conservative intensity was exhausting, and I went to London in 1996, just missing the "outbreak" of the current peace process in the North, but unable to stay any longer. From a safe distance, refusing the destiny that oppressed me, rejecting that essentialism that enshrouded me, my fabulous, desirous, erotic alter ego *Queenie* was born.

### **Intersex, "anatomical drag", and a new land and culture**

*Queenie* was developed with a nod to Judith Butler's "lesbian phallus" (Butler, 1993), Sigmund Freud's "female phallic lack" (Freud, 1933), Barbara Creed's "monstrous feminine" (Creed, 1989), and my own developing research on non-binary, non-essentialised intersex bodies that countered the certainty of fixed and singular identity (Harper, 2007). *Queenie* knitted her own phallus – detachable, portable, pink, flaccid and ever expanding – in a series of public knitting performances in Derry and London (Harper, *Queenie knits one, purls one*, 2003). Working in England, I had opportunity to create a more experimental, marginal practice that came to investigate phallic mobility, camp performance conventions, gender stereotypical materiality, and – importantly – to explore somatic and erotic pleasure in the making and enacting of a new art practice that reflected, again without looking directly, the need to challenge the absolutist conventions of my homeland.

For the fabulous phallus-knitting *Queenie*, I created undergarments that referenced binary sex anatomy but re-constructed it – in the cut and stitched materials of cloth and clothing culture rather

than of nature – in the form of non-binary, mobile, surgically-stitched genitalia. Horns and antlers allowed channelling of animal virility in phallic form, as well as providing a necessary frisson of Irish cultural “horniness”. Fabrics came ready-loaded with sexual and gendered meaning – butch black leather jacket, seductive sheer chiffon, tight-laced tight-lipped corsetry, lusciously sensual velvet, feathers for teasing and pleasing, and the snap of restricting rubber, allowed these references to both inform, stimulate and confuse.

### **Figure 5**

The undergarments were created to be put on and taken off, furthering a concept of sex malleability and gender mobility that was becoming an increasing imperative in my thinking and imagining not only a “new” Irish female body, less certain construct of sex, sexuality and cultural identity. My concept of “anatomical drag” conflated the idea of an “in-between” or unfixed sexual body (as in anatomy) with the idea of an “in between” or unfixed gendered body (as in drag), with the idea of an “in-between” N/Irish identity, that allowed a certain imaginative mobility. The concept gave me license to supplement and augment my own genitalia, my own biology, and therefore my own (perceived) Irish female destiny, reimagining my body as simultaneously biologically informed, culturally created, politically potent, and potentially wild and unfixed.

The *jouissance* with which I created Queenie’s *Anatomical Drag* also influenced the large public art commissions that I undertook around this period. These included *Heart* (2001), installed in The Women’s Centre, Derry, a work that allowed me to articulate female empowerment and desire. Luscious soft pink velvet was ruched to create a Canadian smocked, hand-stitched and fitted ceiling work of considerable proportion, patterned with folds and soft pleats radiating from the centre to the edges in concentric circles, based on patterns carved on ancient Irish stones. Echoing connections between the head and the heart, and connecting conceptually with the Los Angeles Woman House project of 1972, this was a celebration work of women’s culture for a women’s space. Maoliosa Boyle, curator of the *Women Transforming Spaces* project, described *Heart* as ‘transformative and magical with as many referents as dreams allow for love, comfort, pleasure, sexual desire, sumptuous, gorgeous, decorative and sensually honouring to the women encountering it’ [Boyle, 2001, Web].

### **Figure 6**

*Jouissance* too in the creation of *The Healing Bell* for Belfast’s Royal Victoria Hospital, witness site of much of the fallout of Northern Ireland’s sectarian violence. Suspended in the fourteen-metres high atrium through which most visitors, staff and patient admissions pass, I used labyrinthine arterial motifs for this commission, working again in velvet but in conjunction with

hand made paper, in deep royal blue with cobalt, lapis and ultramarine tones, the outer surface shrouding the glowing gold-leafed interior, revealing to those who walk underneath the power of healing and ascendant energy so vital in a post-conflict Northern Ireland, and so vital too for the emergent and hopeful new millennium Ireland. That new Ireland was still struggling to evolve – in a sister commission for Belfast’s Mater Hospital, title *100 Words for Mother*, I engaged the community in creating the multi-piece work – one of the few male contributors was omitted from the final installation by decision of the hospital authorities, as his work referenced the unborn twins killed in the IRA bomb in Omagh in 1998. It was felt too uncomfortable to refer even tenderly, even obliquely to two wanted foetuses, terminated by the sectarian conflict in its own death throes before the current peace process began.

Still greater *jouissance* again in a Gaelic Arts Agency commission in response to a Scots Gaelic poem by a fifteenth-century woman called Iseabail (MacLean, 2002). The text articulated Iseabail’s erotic desire for her priest, and my photographic and painted work was additionally veiled with white chiffon, in conceptual linkage of cloth, body and culture. And ultimate *jouissance* in the textile and performic work that allowed me to create a drag alter ego through which to dress, stitch or fashion both sex and gender. Queenie mobilised the traditions of so-called women’s work of sewing, laundering and washing, the taking care work, as a reclamation and challenge to patriarchal, parochial and proscriptive culture of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

### **Queenie O Queenie**

Street-walking in the *Walking the Walk* performance (2001), Queenie also shone a light on the sex trade in Derry, a never discussed proxy for general sexual repression and conformity in my culture then. The locus of that trade was historically Porter’s Bar on Foyle Street, where Queenie made nocturnal new best friends amongst the city’s drinkers, camp-ers and lovers. This was a different Derry-Londonderry to either that typified in representations of the political conflict, or in the city’s positioning as UK City of Culture 2013, and Queenie’s place in the “gaps between”, the selvedges of the city’s fabric, was as a salve to the harshness experienced in this divided and devastated place.

Queenie’s public ironing performances attracted press and media attention, as Queenie “ironing bombed” the city by turning up in public spaces with bejewelled iron and sequined ironing board. Ironing the shirts of passers-by, taking in laundry, mending and darning on the spot, and pressing hospital linens – references to the domestic work that is lowly and unseen but can be mobilised as an act of love or interpreted as an act of personal politics transcending cultural damage and decay. Northern Ireland, Ireland, Queenie believed, had been lost for a bit of tender loving care. Any problem could be solved by a good burst of steam, and the firm pressure of a hot iron, which is why

Queenie stood for election to Derry City Council in 2001 on the single issue of *Free Ironing* – a real cloth and culture story!

The Walls of Derry, also known as the Maiden City because those walls were never penetrated, are the iconic symbols and historic location of the 1688-89 Siege of Derry conflict between Irish and Crown forces. They have been witness to serious and prolonged sectarian conflict through the ages, and they bear the scars. With a kitchen sponge and soapy spray, Queenie's *Washing the Walls* performance (2001) aimed to make a domestic-scale interjection to reflect on the paradox futility and nobility of attempted erasure of history, memory, trauma and loss.

As public artefacts of the Northern Irish conflict, the inscribed and impacted walls of Derry and Belfast in particular are of considerable cultural importance as memorials, as interfaces, and as texts. Queenie took great and particular care, as with her laundering, ironing and mending, to make her intervention a domestic act of political love. And the concept of a politics of personal dimension was always an essential part of Queenie's mock-seductive presence in the city. Declan Sheehan acknowledged Queenie's ubiquity in public appearance and media presence, in public space and public life, as 'near universal visibility' for the two months of Queenie Fest, kindly concluding that 'ultimately what outlives Queenie's physical presence is Queenie as an alluring and charming creation' (Sheehan, 2001, 42-43).

### **Stained and Bloodied Cloths of Ireland**

I was invited back to Derry in 2013 to deliver a public lecture on the city's shirt-making heritage, its textile culture and industrial history, at the Shirt Factory Project, part of the UK City of Culture celebrations. Just as the Loyalist flags and banners described earlier are multiply functional *and* fancy, offensive *and* beautiful, attracting luck and dissuading evil, the symbol of the shirt in Derry is a complex and many-layered textile signifier.

#### **Figure 7**

The bloodstained shirt of James Connolly, leader of the Irish Citizen Army, at Dublin's General Post Office in O'Connell Street, during the Irish Easter Rising 1916 is just such a sacred cloth. Worn during the fighting in Dublin, its preservation in the National Museum of Ireland testifies to its cultural value to the Irish nation's history. Connolly's capture and execution by British firing squad, seated in a chair, a serious bullet wound to his ankle, is less heroic though. The man is abject, not triumphant; the banner sagging, not taut; the flag is flaccid, not erect; and the shirt is stained, not starched. John Hume, Nobel Laureate, and principal architect of the Northern Irish peace process,

recalled his father's assertion that 'You cannot eat a flag...real politics is about the living standards, about social and economic development. It's not about waving flags at one another' (Griehsel, 2016, Web). Nor is it about championing a failed revolution, a century ago. In the context of Ireland's struggles with sexual morality and autonomy, and Northern Ireland's thirty years of sectarian conflict and its aftermath, it may be worth *not* waving flags for a change.

The fabric of the island, and its culture, is marked by the leakage of persistent sores and raw wounds borne by the unhealed messy flesh of the national body, swaddled, shrouded, stifled and sheltered by cloth (Barnett, 2008, 203-215). Enduring stains on walls, cloths and hearts linger as indexes of moments of existence, proof of happenings, evidence of desire or grief, memories traced on cloths, physical and psychic evidence of the corporeal, imprinting the sensations of smell, touch, sorrow and mortality into fabric's history (von Busch, 2005, 5), and resisting – like prolonged death throes or the never-ending-ness of a death-rattle – the body's ultimate erasure (Barthes, 1979, 26-27).

The *Healing Through Remembering* project audited over four thousand material, social and political cultural artifacts of the Northern Irish conflict (Brown, 2008), and my *Stained and Bloodied Cloths of Ireland* project reflects the role of cloth and clothing in receiving our human smells, our sweat, our shape even, and in illuminating social, cultural, material and gendered constructions of identity and in making meaning (Stallybrass, 1999, 28).

Paramilitary balaclavas, bulletproof flak jackets, and Kevlar bomb disposal suits. The Hunger Strikers blanket shrouds, wrapping their naked bodies in prison blankets, smeared with excrement on their cell walls. Those filthy blankets came to be shrouds for those on hunger strike, marked by the fluids of dying bodies, with the intimate body-memories of sorrow and abjection, the special stigmata on a textile substrate, hovering on the border between the living and the corpse (Kristeva, 1982). Tar and feather warnings poured on the shaven heads of Northern Irish women accused of relationships with soldiers or policemen in the early years of the "Troubles", savage anointments, ritual punishments for perceived sexual transgressions, a warning to women that their bodies were not theirs, but policed by the brutal politics of their land and culture. Hooded men and body bags, swaddling cloths, and deathbed sheets. Hand-knitted dishcloth, tea-stained, a Presbyterian life ebbed away through a catheter, blood dark and thick, seemingly coming in clotted pints. I can see his delicate hands, and how he moved them when flustered. I can see him wringing out the cloth, years after his Mammy's death, wishing his conscience was still there (Harper, 2015). These – and more – are *The Stained and Bloodied Cloths of Ireland*.

## Figure 8

On 30 January 1972, thirteen unarmed civil rights marchers were shot dead by British Paratroopers in Derry (a fourteenth died months later from wounds). The first fatality, seventeen-year-old old Jackie Duddy, was carried away from the gunfire, with Father Edward Daly using his white handkerchief as a “cease firing flag” to enable removal to safety of Jackie’s body.

### **Figure 9**

The handkerchief, washed and ironed carefully, the labour of laundry translating into the stoic rituals of mourning and memory, was treasured by the Duddy family and donated by them to the community-based and run Museum of Free Derry in the city. The handkerchief itself was embroidered with a neat label saying “Fr. E. Daly”, stitched by the priest’s mother so that the handkerchief would not be lost when it was laundered. These careful letters picked out in navy thread speak volumes of a mother’s love for and pride in her son. Mrs Duddy missed out on her son’s adult life, and I have been told that she used to take a quilt on a cold day to Jackie’s grave to “keep him warm”.

The handkerchief is accompanied at the Museum by a folded baby’s sleepsuit, grubby and stained with blood. This little sleepsuit was snatched from a home to staunch the wounds of another seventeen-year-old – Michael Kelly – also shot dead by the British Army on Bloody Sunday. These two cloths – a humble cared-for handkerchief and a baby’s care-worn sleepsuit – seem more appropriate flags than the bombastic textiles of ceremonial, sectarian and nostalgic polemic most associated with Northern Ireland.

So to return to the beginning, the personal *is* political. Ireland’s female bodies continue to struggle for equality of citizenship, social justice, human rights, and full reproductive autonomy. Seamus Heaney and Sophocles (1991) told us:

History says, don't hope  
On this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
And hope and history rhyme.

When we accept that Ireland’s history is a cloth, a bloodied and stained cloth, marked irreversibly by history, conflict and abuse, bloodied by repression and denial of *all* her people’s rights and needs, then – with compassion, empathy, humility and heart – we just might

make peace with our past and truly create a *new* Rising. Anne Enright wrote recently of the Irish Easter Rising 1916:

Ireland was for a long time interested in the idea of suffering well, or of suffering better than the oppressor; none was expected to suffer more, or more quietly, than the women of Ireland, into whose bodies and biology suffering was hard-wired. So the idea of blood sacrifice is not removed...from a modern state that cannot legislate for the proper medical treatment of pregnant women, because suffering is something we are supposed to do well (2016).

But the women of Ireland, north and south, can and will Rise, can and will take ownership of our Irish bodies and our Irish human rights:

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs ? (Angelou, 1978)

This dance, this sexiness, and these diamonds is my wish for Ireland's Women's *Oestrogen* Rising (2016).

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

1. In December 1971 Reginald Maudling, then British Home Secretary, declared that the situation in Northern Ireland at that time amounted to "an acceptable level of violence". Later Unionist politicians in particular claimed that this term effectively became the security policy of successive British governments who were prepared to countenance paramilitary activity so long as it remained within what it judged to be manageable proportions. <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/glossary.htm>
2. My works from this period were solo launched at Derry's innovative powerhouse, the Orchard Gallery curated by Declan McGonagle and then Noreen O'Hare [Note 1], and were included in the *Parable Island* show at Liverpool's Bluecoat Gallery (1991); in the *Poetic Land/Political Territory* exhibition at Scottish, Welsh and English galleries that included The Barbican, London (1995-96); and in the Arts Council's *Human/Nature* exhibition that toured Canada (1995-96). *A Beginning* travelled from Orchard Gallery, Derry to eleven Irish and UK venues throughout 1991-93, including Project Arts Centre, Dublin and Orpheus Gallery, Belfast
3. It is important to note here that while Ireland – as a whole – is predominantly Catholic, the culture north and south has been repressive across the religious range, as witnessed by the terrible regimes of the Protestant Bethany Women and Children's Homes).
4. To give some sense of the times, I spent the summers of 1983 and 1984 at Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, England, where I came into contact with women, several from Ireland, who significantly influenced my thinking on feminism, women's reproductive rights, sexuality and autonomy, but it was some years before I could speak openly about such issues, such was the shame, stigma and societal disapproval attached to these issues in my personal culture.

## Figure captions

Figure 1: CATHERINE HARPER *Woman Mouth Stapled Shut (detail)* 1988-90, mixed natural media, bitumen, metal staple, sculpture 150 x150 90 cm. Private collection in Ireland.

Figure 2: CATHERINE HARPER *Síle on her haunches* 1990, mixed natural media, bitumen, hand made papers, 90 x 150 cm. Collection Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Ireland.

Figure 3: CATHERINE HARPER *Ourselves Alone (Sinn Féin)* 1990, mixed media including hand made paper, sisal, bitumen, 130 x 160 x 20 cms. Private collection in Ireland.

Figure 4: CATHERINE HARPER *The Big Red (detail)* 1994, dyed red bedding, unwashed sheep's fleece, size variable 800 x 500 cms. Collection of Belfast City Council / Waterfront Hall, Belfast.

Figure 5: CATHERINE HARPER *Queenie knits one, purls one...The Virtues* 2003, medievalmodern Gallery, Marylebone, London.

Figure 6: CATHERINE HARPER *Heart* 2001, ruched velvet ceiling, 8000 x 4000 cm. Collection of The Women's Centre, Derry.

Figure 7: *James Connolly's shirt* 1916 Collection of the National Museum of Ireland

Figure 8: *Father Edward Daly with the body of Jackie Duddy, Bloody Sunday 1972* (Image: copyright Fulvio Grimaldi, courtesy Museum of Free Derry).

Figure 9: *Father Daly's handkerchief, Bloody Sunday 1972* (courtesy Museum of Free Derry).