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A Radical Feminist Diaspora: Speaking of IMELDA, reproductive justice and Ireland

Speaking of IMELDA

Abstract

Speaking of IMELDA discuss how they counter restrictive Irish legislation on reproduction from their location in London. Analysing the use of performative resistance, they firstly situate their work within the legacies of 1980s London-Irish feminist activism to reflect on the radical aspects of diasporic communities. IMELDA then consider the 'performative activism of 'loose' women who both violate and affirm social constructions and projections of 'normative' femininity' (Gale, 2015: 314). We argue that IMELDA actions are a messy alliance between art and politics enabling a loosely framed DIY aesthetics to spill out from artistic representation into the political sphere and respond to crude propositions.

Introduction

This chapter situates the London-based, direct-action performance collective, Speaking of IMELDA, within a tradition of alternative feminist Irish diasporic activist groups in Britain who have campaigned for reproductive rights. By contextualising Irish feminist activist collectives in London from the 1970s to present day, we argue for the political efficacy and vitality of the Irish feminist diaspora. Written collectively by members of Speaking of IMELDA, the chapter maps the actions we have undertaken to challenge the restrictions on abortion in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. We further detail our attempts to raise awareness in Britain of the inequity experienced by Northern Irish women, due to the rigid opposition to abortion maintained by dominant political parties in Northern Ireland and the British government's failure to uphold equal access to reproductive healthcare to all UK citizens.

We frame our actions as being influenced by what we are terming a 'feminist diasporic political radicalism' - a form of radicalism that is informed by being 'cut loose' from the gendered cultural

constructs of the home state, enabled by our geographical positioning outside of the island of Ireland. We further situate feminist diasporic political radicalism as being informed by the untethered freedom of 'loose women' within our collective. We theorise the idea of 'loose women' not only in terms of the looseness of our methods and aesthetics, but in how, within our actions, this sense of looseness informs the specific approaches we use to challenge oppressive cultural ideals of femininity. We argue that our actions are a messy alliance between art and politics; our loosely framed D.I.O (Do It Ourselves) aesthetics spill out crudely from artistic representation into the political realm where they demand a response.

This chapter traces the influence of feminist diasporic political radicalism on activist strategies. Throughout the chapter, we outline the strategies we have devised to act in solidarity with the ongoing battle for reproductive rights across the island of Ireland. Firstly, we outline the origins of Speaking of IMELDA and situate our work in relation to past Irish diasporic feminist activist groups that originated in Britain, in particular those focused on reproductive rights. We then explain how our work responds to the religious fundamentalism influencing legislative restrictions on reproductive rights in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Following this, a discussion of our use of direct action and performance demonstrates the ways in which the concept of 'looseness' is central to the methods we use to subvert the constructs of femininity associated with Ireland. Finally, we outline how the positioning of the tactics deployed by Speaking of IMELDA within the intersection between culture and politics upsets the cultural hegemony of both Irish states.

Speaking of IMELDA is a collective comprised largely, although not exclusively, of Irish women living in London. Our collective is comprised of a diversity of women of all ages and from many walks of life, including those working in education, the creative arts, health, social care and activism. Our collective history of activism spans reproductive rights, anti-racism, LGBTQI rights, anti-austerity movements in

England and Ireland, Irish Travellers' rights, support for refugees and migrants and formerly challenging the human rights abuses by the British Army in Northern Ireland, including supporting the rights of women political prisoners during the Troubles (1968-98).

The group was initiated by women who had emigrated from Ireland since 2000 with the aim of challenging the legislative restrictions on abortion across the island of Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland the 8th Amendment to the Irish constitution, which equates the life of a pregnant person with that of an unborn foetus from conception, exerts a 'chilling effect' on the reproductive rights of women in Ireland (Amnesty International, 2015: 8). In the North access to reproductive health services are also heavily restricted, due to the failure of the British state to extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland, alongside continued political opposition to abortion within the Northern Ireland Executive.

Speaking of IMELDA was formally established in December 2013 following a meeting at which Ann Rossiter was invited to speak about her activist history. A member of Speaking of IMELDA since that meeting, Rossiter is also a former member of Irish Women's Abortion Support Group (IWASG), a long time abortion rights activist and author of *Ireland's Hidden Diaspora: The Abortion Trail and The Making of a London Irish Underground 1980-2000'* (2009).

Maintaining links to the past: Irish feminist diasporic radicalism

Placing our actions in a historical context has been central to the ethos of Speaking of IMELDA. From the outset we have sought to retrieve and activate the work of our feminist predecessors. For example, the name Imelda, a common girl's name in Ireland, recalls the work of IWASG – a group of activists who provided support to women travelling from Ireland to England for abortions between 1980 and 2000. IWASG, discussed in more depth below, used Imelda as a secret code-word for abortion. This code-word enabled Irish women travelling to England for abortions to keep their plans secret so as to avoid stigma,

and up until 1992 when the right to travel for abortion was implemented, criminalisation. We use IMELDA as an anagram for 'Ireland Making England the Legal Destination for Abortion'. We also wear the colour red in tribute to the work of IWASG, whose members sometimes wore a red skirt, so as to be identifiable, when collecting women travelling for abortion at train stations and airport terminals. Notably, we also harness the association of red with danger and the deviant sexuality of 'loose women'. We see maintaining these links to the past as crucial to removing the longstanding barriers to progress on reproductive rights in Ireland. Such connections with past activism also make us proud and give us the commitment to continue the work.

Up to six thousand women from the Irish region continually travel to the UK each year to access abortion services, often at considerable expense and stress. Furthermore, in 2013 the Irish Republic implemented a 14-year prison sentence for women who have abortions in Ireland illegally. This has dire consequences for women who take pro-abortive medication because they cannot afford to travel or are not permitted to leave the country. We want women in the Irish region, and more widely, to have control over their own bodies and access to medical services which support their choices. In reclaiming the name IMELDA we wish to act in solidarity with women’s groups who have sought to counteract the inhumanity of state legislation in both Northern and Southern Ireland, while operating against the silencing and shaming of women who have abortions.

Irish feminist activity in Britain stretches back to the early 1880s when branches of the Ladies Land League, a proto-feminist organization fighting against eviction and for land reform in Ireland, were established in south London (Russell, 1981). Although there were many factors and influences that differentiated the Irish and British social formations, not least Ireland’s colonial position versus Britain’s imperial one (Cullen Owens, 1984:103-112), interaction continued across the Irish Sea, and in Britain itself between native British women and Irish émigrés, as feminist activism evolved into a social

movement in the early 1900s before the advent of World War 1, Ireland's Rising against British rule in 1916 and the War of Independence, 1919-1921. These interactions between first-wave feminists were notably in the areas of female suffrage and labouring women's rights (Sylvia Pankhurst being a key figure on the British side), thereby creating an early form of transnational feminism in action' (Murphy, 1989). This was also visible in East London suffragette newspaper *The Women's Dreadnought* (May-July 1916), it being the first British newspaper to report on the Dublin 1916 Rising and its aftermath.

With the arrival of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an Irish diasporic feminist identity took shape within the broad parameters of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, and against the backdrop of three decades of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' (1968-98). Once again, there were factors and influences differentiating Irish and British feminism. While bread-and-butter issues, such as reproductive rights, childcare, equal pay and sexuality were common to both, Irish feminism also faced the fallout from an armed conflict in Northern Ireland including; British military occupation (28,000 troops at its peak in 1972), a bombing campaign carried out mainly by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland and on the British mainland; and large-scale incarceration of men and women in Northern Irish and British jails. Following the descent into armed conflict in Northern Ireland, and coinciding with the rise of the women's movement in the western world, feminist groups, such as the Women on Ireland Collective (1973-4), the Women and Ireland Group (1976-80) and the London Armagh Coordinating Group (1980-87) were initiated mainly by Irish women around Britain. Primarily, their work involved highlighting the lives of republican women in their shattered communities in the conflict zones in Northern Ireland, drawing attention to the treatment of women political prisoners, especially the practice of strip searching as a form of sexual harassment ('Strip Searches in Armagh Jail,' Women Behind the Wire, London Armagh Group, 1984) campaigning against the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1974) and for the removal of British troops (Irish Women at War: Papers from the Feminism and Ireland Workshop, 1977).

These feminist groups were open to all regardless of nationality or ethnicity. Non-Irish feminists joined with their Irish sisters in campaigning in the British movement on the various issues related to the Troubles, but their collective efforts failed to make a significant impact due to ideological differences over militant nationalism, colonialism and religion (Rossiter, 2017: 153-168). Despite international slogans of the movement like 'sisterhood is global', a lesson well learnt from the experience was that unless a global sisterhood is consciously placed in its historical and political context, as it is in the notion of 'intersectionality' (the recognition of difference and the interlocking of systems of oppression), feminist solidarity is 'shaky at best' (Mohanty, 1992: 74-92). After the Socialist Feminist Conference on Imperialism and Women's Oppression Worldwide (1980) and the mid-1980s shift towards embracing a non-unitary experience of womanhood (Wallsgrove, 1985), socialist feminism was better able to relate to the multiplicity of issues stemming from the Troubles and the Irish national question.

The Irish Women's Abortion Support Group (IWASG) 1980-2000

The formation of the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group (1980-2000) and the London-Irish Women's Centre (1983-2012), both exclusive to Irish women, can be viewed as a response to the marginalisation of Irish issues in the wider feminist movement and to the 'othering' and essentialising of Irish people in Britain during the Troubles. The London Irish Women's Centre, with recognition and support from bodies such as the Greater London Council, set about articulating women's perspectives, ultimately contributing to the shaping of an 'alternative Irish community' in Britain (Rossiter, 2009: 53-74).

The London-based Irish feminists who set up the voluntary Irish Women's Abortion Support Group (IWASG) in 1980 were following a tradition of philanthropic work at ports and railway stations in Britain established in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Whereas lay and religious welfare agencies such as the Legion of Mary (founded 1921) provided unaccompanied Irish females with practical support,

emanating primarily from a desire to flag up the grave moral dangers to which women would be exposed in their new lives (Redmond, 2015: 55-76), IWASG's concern was directed specifically at pregnant women seeking a safe and legal abortion under the 1967 British Abortion Act. Such philanthropic and advocacy work has been described variously as feminist voluntarism and 'civic' or 'practice-focused' feminism (Fletcher, 2015). Importantly, it implicitly subverted the obdurate, anti-abortion stance of both Irish states in thrall to the Catholic and fundamentalist Protestant churches.

IWASG was a non-hierarchical feminist collective whose members defined themselves as lesbian, bi or straight, from Catholic or Protestant backgrounds. They had working-class, middle-class and rural origins in Northern Ireland or the Republic, or were British-born second-and third-generation Irish. The all-Irish nature of the membership, rather than being ethnically exclusive by design, was a response to abortion seekers' reports of the judgmental attitudes of their non-Irish hosts – an experience all too common during the thirty years of the Irish Troubles and one that would be recognised by members of the Muslim community today (Finch, 2017: 137-152; Casey 2017: 213-226), although probably not by Irish migrants of the Celtic Tiger period. The Celtic Tiger refers to the unprecedented economic boom during the 1990s, which followed the Republic of Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community in 1973 (now the European Union). During this period wealth was generated by the provision of tax-breaks to foreign, largely American, companies who set up in the Republic, alongside a disproportionate inflation in the housing market. This period of prosperity ended with the global economic crisis in 2008 and the collapse of the banks in the Irish Republic in 2010, which led to the acceptance of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and EU bailouts.

The services provided by IWASG ranged from helping to organise travel and escorting abortion seekers to and from transport hubs, to making clinic appointments, sorting out fees, and providing hospitality and overnight accommodation in IWASG members' homes. In addition to fundraising and practical support, a lot of campaigning was directed at securing legal changes in Ireland and the UK. By 2000, the combined

impact of the internet, mobile phones, the widespread availability of credit and the advent of cheap airline travel eliminated the demand for help. IWASG closed down. In 2004, ESCORT, a Liverpool-based service, set up in 1988, providing escort and accommodation services (Fletcher, 2015), also ceased. However, the economic crash of 2008 impacted heavily on women with unwanted pregnancies in Northern Ireland and the Republic. The Abortion Support Network was formed in London in 2009 in response to renewed cries for help and support (ASN, 2016). Although not specifically an 'Irish' organisation, the Abortion Support Network deals mostly with Irish clients and champions Irish reproductive rights activism.

The positioning of Irish feminist groups in Britain, allows for a greater freedom to critique the boundaries of women's roles in Ireland. Strategically, we form a diasporic radicalism. The four current London-based voluntary groups concerned with Irish women's reproductive rights - the Abortion Support Network, Speaking of IMELDA, the London Irish Feminist Network (founded after the London Irish Women's Centre closed in 2012) and the London-Irish Abortion Rights Campaign (formed in 2016), have come into existence in the third wave feminist environment. All use social media extensively and are connected with pro-choice activists in both parts of Ireland and across the world.

Raising a radical diasporic voice against the moral regulation of women in the Republic of Ireland

While Speaking of IMELDA has duly harnessed social media to heighten our message, we prioritise public interventions that are direct, loud and unapologetic. These actions have sought to radically challenge the stereotypes of the quiet and pure Irish woman so imposed by religious forces. For instance, in our first action, Speaking of IMELDA acted as dissonant voices intervening in a conference in Camden attended by Catholic clergy on the subject of faith and the Irish diaspora on International Women's Day 2014. Here, IMELDA called upon the so-called 'radical and engaged' church to take action on the silenced – but daily – reality of pregnant people travelling abroad to access reproductive healthcare (8

March 2014 action, 2014). Not only did this action make vocal a rarely spoken issue, it also infiltrated a religious space where women were able to serve an alternative role to that pre-determined by church teachings – that of activists, autonomous over their own bodies and selves.

Since the formation of the Irish State in 1922, the Catholic Church has been a dominant political force in the Republic of Ireland. The interaction of church and state has not only imposed Catholic teaching on all matters of policy – from education, to social security, to health – it has also heavily infiltrated the social and cultural life of the Irish populace. This has translated into the reverence of domesticity and subservience in women, motherhood being valorised as a woman's primary sexual purpose. Female purity, as Fischer (2016) notes, became conflated with national identity. The Irish woman did not just represent herself; she was the symbol of a pure, superior and – notably – Catholic Ireland. Any deviation from this archetype was seen to tarnish not only the individual, but also to taint the idealised nation state, which had been carefully constructed by the church. As such, 'deviant' acts – particularly those concerning female sexuality – were shrouded in guilt, shame and secrecy. The Magdalene Laundries, mother and baby homes and non-consensual practices of symphysiotomy (an outdated surgical procedure whereby the pelvis is severed during childbirth that was replaced by caesarian section, which Catholic doctors revived in the Republic between the 1940s and 1980s) were emblematic of this systematic maltreatment of women (Inglis, 2005; Inglis and MacKeogh, 2012). Inglis and MacKeogh (2012) note that, despite some waning of the Church's influence, its long domination has left deep and enduring scars.

Although the country has undergone significant social and economic shifts in recent decades (for example achieving equal marriage in 2015), restrictions on reproductive rights remain the stronghold of a patriarchal, punitive and largely Catholic state. Such ideology is enshrined in the Irish Constitution, which since 1983 has endowed the foetus with the same rights as those of the pregnant person, charging the state with the vindication of the foetus' rights. In practice, 'vindication' sanctioned, amongst other things, a

court injunction in 1992, which forced an underage victim of rape, whose family had taken her to the UK for an abortion, to return to Ireland (known as the X Case). This court injunction was challenged on the grounds that the fourteen year old was suicidal as a result of the pregnancy. Although the Supreme Court ruling following the X-case asserted that suicide counted as a threat to life, this was not enacted in law until 2013 under The Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2013). Notably, this Act also put in place a fourteen-year prison sentence for those who have an abortion illegally in the Republic. Despite the outlawing of interference in travel to another jurisdiction for an abortion or the provision of information about services in another state, the tentacles of the 8th Amendment have continued to expand. In October 2012, a miscarriage was not medically assisted because of the presence of a foetal heartbeat, so risking the development of septicemia, which resulted in the death of Savita Halappanavar. In 2014, a suicidal and clearly vulnerable asylum seeker, pregnant as a result of rape, was cajoled into agreeing to a caesarian section. Later the same year, doctors cited the 8th Amendment as the reason that a dead woman, who had been seventeen weeks pregnant, was kept on a life support machine until the courts ruled that the machine could be turned off (Carolan, 2014). In October 2016, the Health and Safety Executive tried - again citing the amendment - but failed, in a legal action to force a third time mother to deliver by caesarean section.

In March 2015, Speaking of IMELDA humorously intervened in the London St. Patrick’s Day Parade. This intervention into a long-established cultural event for the Irish diaspora, as well as Londoners and visitors to the city, proved a radical articulation of the presence of the issue of Ireland making England the legal destination for abortion. It also acted as a symbolic challenge to the Catholic Church and the patriarchal culture underpinning it. A twelve foot puppet of St. Patrick, the first bishop of Ireland, garbed in green with his staff and mitre is rolled out annually in the London parade and in 2015 was greeted by a fleet of IMELDAs wearing red mitres and cloaks, as if female bishops had been permitted by the Catholic Church, and shouting ‘down with Patrick-archy!’ and ‘stop in the name of choice!’ (IMELDA disrupts the St. Patrick’s Day Parade, 2015). Catholic ideologies, which seek to moralise individual choices, stretch

far wider than Ireland alone. In September 2015, Pope Francis announced in a public letter that, between 8 December 2015 and 6 November 2016, absolution would be offered to women who have had abortions, so long as they expressed remorse and sought forgiveness from a priest (Kirchgaessner, 2015). The interpretation of abortion as a sin that needs to be forgiven is emblematic of Catholic ideology, where the shame lies not only in the act itself, but in failing to properly conceal it and show remorse (Inglis and MacKeogh, 2012).

IMELDA reacted to the papal comments at a 2015 nationwide pro-choice march in Dublin. Dressed as bishops once again and reading from 'the word', we sharply contradicted the Pope's language and message. Definitively counteracting the hypocrisy that cloaked the papal comments, the speech linked the statement from the Vatican to the hypocrisy of the Irish government in maintaining Ireland's abortion-free character and offering the right to travel as a substandard concession. IMELDA's pro-choice bishops drew upon Ireland's troubled history, identifying the country's lack of reproductive rights as emblematic of the systematic punishment of women, which has been a feature of the State since its conception. The speech was definitive in its proclamation: 'We do not need phoney concessions or absolution from those who have enacted such brutal misogyny against women in Ireland historically' (Solidarity Times, 2015). Here, we emphasised the autonomy vested within Irish people, acknowledging the moral agency they held over their own bodies.

These actions are particularly radical in the context of Ireland's blasphemy law. Introduced in 2009, the Defamation Act carries a penalty of up to €25,000 for anyone who 'publishes or utters blasphemous matter' in a manner intended to cause 'outrage' (Defamation Act, 2009). IMELDA have directly challenged this law through highlighting the hypocrisy and misogyny inherent in the Irish Church and state, both from their base in London and – importantly – at home on Irish soil. In doing so, in relation to the country's archaic abortion regime, IMELDA offers a double challenge to church and state.

Embodying a dissonant voice which speaks of the oft-silenced reality of Irish abortions, we offer compassion to those who themselves have felt symbolically bound by Church and state. Similarly, in playing with the ritual emigrants return to Ireland each Christmas, we raise concern for those forced to travel for abortions.

In 2014, we travelled by train and boat to Ireland, offering sups of choice from teapots to fellow travelers reminiscent of the housekeeper Mrs. Doyle in the well-known television series *Father Ted* (A Sup of Choice for Christmas?, 2014). In Dublin we made our arrival known by hanging a huge pair of knickers outside Dáil Éireann (Irish Assembly), carrying the message ‘women are not breeding machines.’ This referenced the aforementioned case of the clinically dead pregnant woman, who was being kept on life-support, against her family’s wishes. In 2015, we strolled around Dublin airport in our red costumes, dressed as nativity-play angels, complete with red-tinseled halos. Holding up a sign that said ‘Welcome Home IMELDA’, we drew attention to the fact that some of the arrivals would be returning from having an abortion abroad, with resentment rather than love in their hearts for ‘the old sod’. The disruption of tradition continued with the placing of a miniature model of a Christmas angel decoration disguised as an abortion seeker with her trademark red suitcase, into the airport’s Christmas crib. To ensure that the state would know that offence was intended, we tied tampons dipped in red ink, to simulate menstruation, to O’Connell Street's Christmas tree – a centre-piece of Dublin's festivities - and rounded off our return with a rendition of pro-choice carols under the iconic Clery’s clock in collaboration with local pro-choice activists (IMELDA in collaboration with the Choicemas Carol Singers, 2015).

‘We are not second-class citizens left to rot:’ challenging restrictions on abortion in Northern Ireland

Although it is the Catholic Church specifically which is credited with upholding cultures of shame, secrecy and repressed sexuality in Ireland, its underlying teachings mirror closely those of other Christian

faiths. This is borne out in the Northern Irish context, where both Catholic and Protestant regimes conspire to keep abortion illegal (Fletcher, 2001). Indeed, the teachings of the Catholic Church in Ireland are emblematic of those of the Protestant faith in Victorian England where women were expected to adhere to a higher moral code than their male counterparts (Rowbotham, 1989; Inglis, 2005). Almost half of the population of Northern Ireland describe themselves as Protestant, Presbyterians being the largest group, followed by Anglicans (Church of Ireland founded by Henry VIII in 1537), Methodists and small sects such as Assemblies of God and the Plymouth Brethern. This identification with Protestantism holds, even where significant minorities are not church-goers and, indeed, may well be atheist or agnostic. The conflation of ethnic identity with a religious affiliation is the product of a political history stretching back to the Plantation (organised colonisation) of Ulster in the early seventeenth century and the establishment of a Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, thanks to the victory of the Protestant King William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Archaic as these events may now seem, they nonetheless set in train an enduring belief system asserting Protestantism's theological and moral superiority over Catholicism, a linking of Protestantism with Unionism (union with the British Crown and Empire), a bulwark against Catholicism, and an imperative to safeguard the union. The construction of political allegiances around religious identity has strengthened the power (paralleled in the Catholic/nationalist community) of the Protestant Churches' promotion of conservative views on social issues, particularly in relation to the family, the role of women in society, sexuality and reproductive rights. Further, the Protestant Churches are integrated into the fabric of society through the clergy's involvement in secular life, whether at the social, personal or community level. As Rosemary Sales (1997, p.141) points out, this close ethno-political association makes dissent a difficult prospect for many Protestants, believers and non-believers alike for fear of being seen as 'disloyal' to their community. Interestingly, opposition to abortion and gay rights has been one of the few areas of agreement between politicians and clergy across both Protestant/unionist and Catholic/nationalist communities and traditions.

Currently in Northern Ireland abortion can only be obtained if a doctor acts ‘only to save the life of the mother’ or if continuing the pregnancy would result in the pregnant woman becoming a ‘physical or mental wreck’ (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 2015). Very few people are referred to have an abortion in Northern Ireland (Jowit, 2016). Most people needing an abortion travel to England and have to pay privately as they cannot obtain it on the NHS. However, due to the fear and confusion surrounding the wording of existing abortion legislation, alongside the hostile political environment, doctors and health professionals are entirely unsure as to how they can advise people needing abortions without facing prosecution themselves for doing so. For instance, Section 58 of the 1861 Offences Against the Persons Act, on ‘the offence of using drugs or instruments to procure abortion’ states:
Every woman being with child, who, with intent to procure her own miscarriage, shall unlawfully administer to herself any poison or other noxious thing, or shall unlawfully use any instrument or other means whatsoever with the like intent, and whosoever, with intent to procure the miscarriage of any woman whether she be or be not with child . . . to be kept in penal servitude for life (Offences Against the Person Act 1861, The National Archives).

The consequences of these laws were recently demonstrated, resulting in the prosecution of a young woman in Northern Ireland for taking the abortion pill in April 2016. The woman was given a three-month sentence (suspended for a year) for accessing medication that is approved by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and freely available to other women in the UK on the NHS. This woman could not afford to travel outside of Northern Ireland to access safe and legal abortion services and was reported to the police by her housemates because they felt that she was not ‘remorseful’ enough (McDonald, 2016). Since then, another woman who had been committed to stand trial for obtaining the abortion pill for her fifteen year-old daughter because she could not afford to pay for a flight and private abortion won the right to contest the decision to prosecute her (Gentleman, 2016). Were she to be prosecuted, she could face life in jail if the judge has a strong anti-choice stance. It is interesting to note that abortion cases are tried as serious criminal cases similar to murder and are heard on indictment at the Crown Court. This

indictment permits the judge wider discretion in sentencing, which can be anything from life in jail to a suspended sentence.

In response to the prosecution of the aforementioned woman who received the 3 month suspended sentence, we created and filmed the action, *Game of Shame*. Taking the format of a game-show, the *Game of Shame* demonstrated how the current law targets the most vulnerable in Northern Irish society, particularly those who cannot afford to travel to access safe and legal abortion services or those who are not permitted to travel due to their residency status. The interactions between the contestants and game-show host holds a mirror up to the lack of concern for women's welfare and human rights both within the current law and the actions of those who push for increased sentencing of women. The *Game of Shame* loudly declares the right of women to have agency over their own bodies and to be fully supported in making reproductive choices without moral condemnation (*Game of Shame*, 2015). In 2016 we attended the first Rally for Choice in Belfast to stand in solidarity with activists resident in Northern Ireland. Dressed as super 'sheros' we delivered a speech praising Diana King, Colette Devlin and Kitty O'Kane, also known as the 'Derry Three' (Solidarity Times, 2016). In opposition to recent prosecutions, the 'Derry Three' handed themselves in to the police for procuring the abortion pill.

As a diasporic voice, Speaking of IMELDA also seeks to raise consciousness in Britain of the plight of Northern Irish women. In May 2014 we paid an uninvited visit to the Secretary of State for Health, Jeremy Hunt. Turning up unexpectedly to his advice surgery at a Sainsbury's supermarket in Farnham we offered Mr. Hunt advice on legislation change (Speaking of IMELDA with Jeremy Hunt, 2014). We consulted with a lawyer who informed us that a slight legislation change would at least allow women in Northern Ireland to have an abortion on the NHS in England or Scotland rather than having to pay privately. During this action we presented Mr. Hunt with bitten red apples with messages attached concerning the travesty of justice impacting on Northern Irish women. Mr. Hunt stuck to the line that

abortion is a devolved issue (under control of Northern Irish Assembly and not the Westminster Parliament).

In 2015, we raised awareness of the situation faced by women in Northern Ireland at the Women of the World Festival (WOW) in London. We were not there as official participants but as Jude Kelly, the founder of WOW, asks people to be activists each year at this festival, we did not think she would mind our pop-up action. We were right: the festival staff even provided us with a microphone and amp. We performed a *Political Pageant* with entrants from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Entrants were judged on their access to reproductive care. Symbols from all countries adorned the entrants' costumes (Imelda Pageant 8 March, 2015). Of course, the Northern Irish entrant, wearing a necklace made of cut-out green shamrocks and red hands of Ulster, lost the political pageant. She subsequently marched around the group in a rage banging her drum (reminiscent of the Orange Marching Parades in Northern Ireland), using Virgin Mary bottles as drum sticks (a reference to Catholicism), chanting 'we are not, we are not, second class citizens left to rot.'

Reframing femininity: loose methods and loose women

Speaking of IMELDA uses direct action and performance as an embodied method of provoking pro-choice discourse in the public realm. We aim to bring the often silenced, but very real issues impacting on women in Ireland into the public domain, thus challenging the institutional confines that maintain these silences. In our campaign video *The Quiet Woman* (2014) we challenged the valorisation of motherhood within marriage and domesticity as the primary roles for women (as enshrined in Article 41.2 of the Irish Constitution), by playfully subverting the domesticated submissiveness of a character played by Irish actress, Maureen O'Hara, in the 1950s film *The Quiet Man* (1952, Ford, Dir.). In the video we appear dressed in our trademark red clothing, each wearing a headscarf and sunglasses, simultaneously referencing a 50s glamour-puss, a washerwoman, and a revolutionary in disguise. We then strung a

washing line of knickers up in front of the Irish Embassy building in London and polished the building with the knickers, all of which were decorated with pro-choice slogans. The low paid worker has been the valorised identity of the Irish in Britain, and in this action we made visible the vast numbers of Irish women engaged in domestic work in Britain until the late twentieth century. The earthiness of the washerwoman, with her rolled up sleeves, metaphorically cleaning Ireland's dirty secrets, while signaling her disgust and contempt, poses a stark challenge to the shame heaped on women who were victimised for pregnancy, poverty, sexuality and vulnerability in both Irish states. A group of IMELDA washerwomen were photographed with PantiBliss, the iconic Irish drag artist, prior to the same sex marriage referendum in Ireland. This act of mutual solidarity forged a new image of how 'femininity' might be re-framed outside of current patriarchal norms. Indeed, our 'knicker-bombing' of the Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny provides an apt example of our refusal to comply with patriarchal ideals of femininity. Interrupting the Taoiseach's party fundraiser at the Crown Moran Hotel in London in 2014, we landed a pair of 'knickers for choice' bearing the slogan 'Repeal the 8th Enda' on his dinner plate (Irish Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, served pro-choice knickers at fundraising dinner, 2014).

Our use of performance has been recognised as feminist Live Art practice and featured at Live Art events, for example, alongside *Are We There Yet?: Study Room Guide on Live Art and Feminism* by the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), London (LADA, 2015) and in the online exhibition, *Live Art and Feminism in the UK*, curated by LADA (2015) for the Google Cultural Institute. The subversions of domesticity and patriarchal constructions of femininity apparent within our actions are reminiscent of the aesthetics and strategies used by feminist artists such Martha Rosler and Bobby Baker, amongst many others. Lois Keidan (2016, 'What is Live Art?'), Director of the Live Art Development Agency, London notes that 'Live Art is not a description of an art form or discipline, but a cultural strategy to include experimental processes and experiential practices.' She situates Live Artists as operating 'in between, and at the edges of more traditional artistic forms' (2016). Most certainly our approach to performance is experimental and situated at the periphery of more traditional practice. We employ various methods of

performance and theatre in our direct actions. For instance, in the spirit of Invisible Theatre as developed by Augusto Boal where interaction lies in improvised public action, we interjected in the London St. Patrick's Day Parade (St. Patrick's Day London, 2014) acting as women who had travelled from Ireland and asked bystanders the way to the nearest abortion clinic. Influenced by live artists, performance artists from the 1960s and the Situationists, who sought to break free of institutional confines and merge art with life, we are equally interventionist in our use of direct action. We are inspired by the aesthetics of performance-based activists, such as Pussy Riot, Sisters Uncut, Liberate Tate, and the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army. We not only perform *in* the public sphere; we actively engage *with* situations as an interventionist strategy. In turn, the actual world also intervenes and meets with our actions. Once we are in a situation, we improvise in the moment, responding to the inter-group dynamic and the inter-social dynamic with the people around us.

We use edited video of our public interventions as a means to heighten our impact, circumvent male-stream media and share our actions more widely. We equally use video as a means of sharing strategies and methods that enable those, who might not be in a position to be vocally pro-choice, to voice their dissent. For instance, *The Quiet Woman* video invites wider participation by encouraging people to decorate knickers with pro-choice slogans and hang them up in public. Our cheap and cheerful, 'loose' and 'D.I.O (Do It Ourselves)' aesthetics can be replicated and improvised by others.

The concept of 'looseness' has several connotations within the methods and aesthetics of Speaking of IMELDA. Our actions are loosely planned and improvised within their moment. The term 'Loose Theatre' is used by Margaretta D'Arcy (2005) to refer to her lifelong work as a 'guerrilla theatre activist.' In an article written by Speaking of IMELDA (2015) for *Contemporary Theatre Review* we situated our activism within the lineage of D'Arcy's work, alongside the work of first-wave feminist activists in an Irish context, such as the women involved in the 1916 Rising and the Irish suffragettes. The term 'loose'

is also used by Maggie B. Gale (2015) to refer to examples of ‘women's protest performance’. Gale examines the ‘gestural potential of women's activist bodies as occurring in public spaces in which those bodies are not socially, politically, or economically equal’ (Gale, 2015: 313). Drawing on Sandra Lee Bartky's concept of the ‘loose woman,’ Gale outlines ‘the performative activism of “loose” women’ as at once enabling a violation and affirmation of 'social constructions and projections of "normative" femininity' (Gale, 2015: 314).

In parodying the cultural constructions of a domesticated submissive femininity, Speaking of IMELDA, on the one hand, highlights these stereotypical ideals. On the other hand, in our loose formations, aesthetics and diversity, we simultaneously transgress and unsettle these oppressive social constructions. A loose woman has been used as a pejorative criticism - we reclaim it as free and libratory in a similar sense to the way ‘The Slut Walk’ protests appropriated the derogatory labels applied to women to subvert the oppressive power of these judgments. We enjoy the association of ‘loose women’ and revel in subverting it to our advantage. This is evident in our Rogue Rose of Tralee action (2015) in which Speaking of IMELDA parodied the format of the annual *Rose of Tralee* pageant on the streets of Tralee, an action that ran synchronically to the main festival. The festival started in 1959 to bring Irish immigrants back to Ireland and to support tourism in the rural area of Tralee. Focused on beauty and personality, female contestants are attended by male escorts who vouch for their virtue and personality. In our version, similar to the action we performed at the WOW Festival, the winners were those who lived in countries with the best reproductive healthcare services. Ms Northern Ireland and Ms Republic of Ireland were the tragic losers, deprived of the reproductive choices available to their sisters living abroad. The action was reported by national broadsheet the *Irish Times,* which understood Speaking of IMELDA's playful subversion of national cultural institutions that proliferate patriarchal images of women (McTiernan, 2015). On the other hand, the action also showed how national nostalgia in diasporic communities is a yearning for the past, which is often at odds with the contemporary and future needs of Irish women. As such, our ‘rogue roses’ not only parodied the construct of the hyper-feminine ‘lovely

girl', but also transcended accepted norms by speaking out about the lack of reproductive rights afforded to women across the island of Ireland (Rogue Rose of Tralee, 2015).

The extent to which women are publicly policed was made apparent a year after our action, when the Sydney Rose Brianna Parkins used her on-stage interview in the 2016 pageant to call for a referendum on the repeal of the 8th Amendment, while wearing a red dress. While her intervention was applauded by many, it was, predictably, criticised for politicising this harmless 'much-loved' ritual. Similarly, Speaking of IMELDA are often told in response to our performances that 'it is not the time or the place' to speak of abortion. While we employ humour, parody and satire in our arsenal of 'loose methods,' we are also proud to be spoilsports, or killjoys to use the term as Sara Ahmed's defines it in 'Living in a Feminist Life' (2010). For Ahmed, the killjoy is the one who speaks out and upsets the apparent acceptance of the status quo. She is following the advice of Audre Lorde, who warned that 'your silence will not protect you' (Lorde, 1977 paper in Sister Outsider, 2007: 41) a pertinent reminder to Irish women that the worst has already been inflicted on them and that speaking up can hardly make matters any worse. Speaking of IMEDLA are killjoys just as Pussy Riot, the Guerrilla Girls, Sisters Uncut, Black Lives Matter, Liberate Tate are. We speak up, we speak out, we break the silence and invite others to do so too.

Writing of the Rose of Tralee Festival and the now (thankfully) defunct annual pageant, the Calor Housewife of the Year, Fintan Walsh outlines the production of a 'homelysexuality', a domesticated, tempered femininity, which constitutes a 'female sexual accent in particular, emptied of depth, eroticism or even what might be understood as subjectivity' (2009, Walsh: 206). Within our public performances we aim to unsettle domesticated femininity. We do this by maintaining space for the diverse individual identities, sexualities, aesthetics and styles of group members to shine through. We purposely draw on the eclectic, intergenerational and intersectional mix of women in our group. While we wear red in our performances, members of the group self-fashion their red clothes in accordance with their own taste and

style. All of our actions are devised collectively in group sessions, drawing on the expertise and, importantly, identities, of group members. Above all, Speaking of IMELDA celebrates the collectivity of women coming together.

Monuments of the past and future: intervening between politics and culture

The collective and collaborative working practices established by Speaking of IMELDA, alongside our refusal to quietly disappear into the diasporic ether, offer a retort to the Irish state's persistent attempts to exclude women from having agency within political and cultural spheres. Describing the lack of a participative class within Irish political spheres, Michael D. Higgins responded presciently to the Finance Bill 2011 in the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) paraphrasing the political scientist, Jurgen Habermas, 'really you can't invite people to be bound by rules and bound by decisions in which they haven't had a chance to consciously participate' (Higgins, 2011). Indicating the historical emergence of the Irish Republic in 1922 as a socialist revolutionary project as much as a project for independence from British colonial rule, Higgins stated his disappointment between what the manifesto for Irish freedom, Poblacht na hÉireann, proclaimed and how those liberties have been upheld:

> I feel that those who wanted Ireland to be independent would have envisaged a country in which there would be far greater distribution of power, that it wouldn't just be confined to the exercise of parliamentary democracy only. There is more to political power than voting once every four or five years. There is the exercise of power in every dimension of life and if a real republic had been founded, we should have been spending decades extending and deepening political power (2011).

Further on and with specific reference to the Global Financial Crisis Higgins declared in this, his final parliamentary speech before successfully running for the office of President that, 'an enormous price is

now already being paid for the broken connection between the aspirations of the people of this planet and those who take decisions on their behalf '(2011). Indeed, since 2011 the Irish Republic has witnessed a rise in cultures of dissent; from protests against the privatisation of water and the emergence of left-wing groups such as People before Profit to the growing social movement for reproductive justice. In identifying how the state was not operating dialectically with disenchanted public spheres, Higgins confessed that administrative power was a kind of rarefied and hegemonic apparatus.

In 2014, after Higgins had become President of Ireland, he made the first official Irish state visit to the UK. This opened an opportunity for Speaking of IMELDA to highlight how Ireland was making England the legal destination for abortion. The IMELDAs fretted about staging an intervention that would face-off with the most symbolically powerful representative in Ireland. Higgins was respected in the group and had championed the reproductive rights of women in Ireland. However, in his role as President he could not be politically partisan. Additionally, as the symbolic head of the Irish state the President represented national values that strategically needed to be challenged. We mapped his itinerary, dressed in our traditional red and protested outside his appointments at the Irish Embassy and a festival gala at the Royal Albert Hall in April 2014 (Irish Embassy, 8 April 2014). Inserting the unspoken arrangements on abortion into the first ever official Irish state visit to Britain felt risky at the time. The visit was seen in the Republic of Ireland as a coming of age in the relationship between the former colony and the colonising power. Speaking of IMELDA was therefore a cause of embarrassment to the Irish state and its reputation abroad and this action was largely repressed by the mainstream media but reported briefly by RTE (the Irish National Broadcaster) and the *Journal* (an online Irish newspaper). These tactics set Speaking of IMELDA up as a 'counter public' (Warner, 2002) that tackled the political administration on how Irish cultural values regarding women were reproduced. Ironically, in achieving the participative effects invoked by Higgins in his appeal for the emergence of public spheres, Higgins became the symbolic object of contestation.

Thereafter, Speaking of IMELDA began to contest cultural institutions and monuments in which we could physically trace the symbolic reproduction of androcentric attitudes and highlight how the symbolism of these institutions led to a hegemonic subjugation of women. Examples of such institutions – as explored above – were the *Rose of Tralee* festival for 'comely maidens' of Irish descent and the annual St. Patrick's Day Parade in London, an event heavily frequented by the Irish diaspora. Yet another was the 100-year commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising which historically led to the emancipation of Ireland from Britain, and in which the original revolutionaries envisaged a state where women were equal. These institutions enact Irish popular culture at a liberal arm's length from the state but work to enculturate the following Irish values: the domesticated Irish female, favour for religious patriarchies whose 'moral cruelty' (Kurdi and Haughton, 2016) has punished Irish women and the Irish nation's manifesto for self-governance while forfeiting any inclusion of female participation in power. These events were intuitive interventions for Speaking of IMELDA where the cultural norms of Irish life could be publically examined both within our country of origin (as in actions at the *Rose of Tralee Festiva*l and at the GPO building in Dublin) and outside it, in our adopted nation (London St. Patrick's Day celebrations 2014, 2015, 2016). By broaching Ireland making England the legal destination for abortion as a discussion point at public cultural occasions, we demonstrate how gender is usually erased as a concern in Irish public spheres. In doing so, we conceivably critique models of public spheres as un-gendered, recognising Nancy Fraser's insights that the 'gender subtext' for Habermas' reading of public spheres are 'unthematized' (Fraser, 2013: 34).

IMELDA's interventions interrogate Irish culture and how it represents itself in terms of gender. We leverage cultural production for political ends: our cultural tactics interfere with the representational logics of mainstream institutions by aiming to create cultural shifts in popular opinion that may lead to legislative and political change. Our work appears in popular culture where an alternative expectation for Irish society and the explicit hope for the repeal of the 8th amendment can be shared with a broad public base. This is how we view the intersections of culture and politics, aligning ourselves with Rancière who

states that a ‘community of sense woven together by artistic practice is a new set of vibrations of the human community in the present; on the other hand, it is a monument that stands as a mediation or a substitute for a people to come’ (Rancière, 2009: 59).

Attending to the actual monuments of the past and their capacity to mediate a people to come, our Easter 2015 action focused on Poblacht na hÉireann, the manifesto of Irish freedom delivered at the General Post Office (GPO) in Dublin in 1916, the headquarters of the Easter Rising. Rearticulating the contents of the document to account for female bodily autonomy, Speaking of IMELDA performed in chains around one of the columns of the GPO, costumed in the era of 1916 (Imelda chains herself to the G.P.O., 2015). The imagery evoked the original socialist revolutionary claims for equality expressed in Poblacht na hÉireann, but the action also took the notion of the monument literally by restaging a revolutionary proclamation at the very site in which Irish national values were inaugurated one hundred years earlier. Echoing Higgins' disappointment in the republic and acknowledging that monuments are an embodiment of the future to come, IMELDA aimed to show the contradictory relationship between monumentalised past hopes and present disappointments. In this way, one of IMELDA's cultural functions is to propose a realignment in the Irish Republic to its originating principle that women are embraced equally. We situate our art activism as a proposition for a ‘people to come’ and as a ‘monument to its expectation, a monument to it absence’ (Rancière, 2009: 59).

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the vital role that feminist diasporic collectives such as Speaking of IMELDA play in disrupting dominant patriarchal codes – both at home and in their adopted nations. Being ‘set loose’, so to speak, in another jurisdiction has emboldened us with greater freedom to act as radical members of the Irish diaspora and directly expose the misogynistic norms of our home country to a new audience, in our trademark imprecise and liberated style. Acting as one of many diasporic feminist

collectives in England (both throughout history and from across the globe), our actions challenge the ongoing issue of Ireland making England the legal destination for abortion, whilst also highlighting the broader pattern of maltreatment perpetuated against women by the Irish state. By nodding to radical diasporic networks of the past (such as the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group), we maintain steady traditions of diasporic activism in protesting the continued denial of bodily autonomy across the island of Ireland.

Our loose and experimental methods challenge some of the silences that surround abortion in Ireland through brazenly subverting public spaces and traditional feminine identities to make known the plight of Irish women. By intruding into areas and in forms that are traditionally unwelcome in patriarchal structures, we give voice to – and indeed embody – our dissatisfaction and broadcast the stark realities of the privileging of the unborn above the living woman to a wider populace. Our style of action is radical in its demanding of a response and forces situations to mould and engage with our interventions, in turn enabling us to respond and adapt to the situation and drive issues forward to new terrain. We engage dissonant voices further afield through our employment of 'do it yourself' aesthetics in a manner which extends the reach of our message far beyond the boundaries of our home and adopted nations.

Although aesthetically loose, the dangerous relationship between church and state for women's autonomy is a prevailing theme in our radicalism. Our engagement with, and consistent confrontation of, religious symbolism in our performances serves to assert directly the role that both Catholic and Protestant institutions have had in policing female sexuality both North and South of the Irish border as well as internationally. Our all-island radicalism has equally brought us into direct combat with statespersons both in Ireland and the UK, and provided us with important opportunities to provoke those in positions of authority and assert the rights of people across Ireland. We recognise and welcome our place in broader channels of pro-choice and diasporic radicalism. By acting in solidarity with groups from Poland, Spain,

Central America and elsewhere, as well as engaging with others fighting for bodily autonomy across Ireland and in the UK, we further the goals of radical feminist activism, by extending the struggle for reproductive rights into broader global focus and boldly asserting the power of female agency and action.

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