The stained and bloodied cloths of Ireland

As a weaver by trade and training, a seamstress and laundress by design, an artist in text and textiles by sensibility, I will spin a yarn, tangle a web, and construct a text(ile) of the inter-weave of narrative, materiality and identity that I define as my intellectual and practice obsessions – ‘the places in-between’ in Irish and Northern Irish gender and identity, and in fabrics of death and desire.

I am Irish, Northern Irish, and from the North of Ireland. Each fragment of my national 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 my land’s twin political traditions – Irish Republicanism and Ulster Unionism – dominant Unionist Loyalism’s 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 ‘apotropaic or talismanic’ textiles apparently protect Northern Ireland’s place in the United Kingdom from the perceived malevolence of Catholic Republicanism and Irish Nationalism. Those 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. Seamus Heaney, however, articulated the power difference between those twin traditions, configuring Ireland as violated virgin and colonized victim of a coercive Act of Union, back turned on a “still imperially/Male” England, and on the authoritative culture and self-affirming politics of Northern Irish Loyalism [1].

In 1980s and early 1990s Belfast, 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 so-called Troubles around me, as some – predominantly male – artists in the North seemed able to, I created textile and material works that referenced older bodies, Bronze and Iron Age bog cadavers – most likely sacrificed or executed, 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…’ [2]

Brian McAvera referred to Northern Irish artists’ tendency ‘towards oblique and layered responses’ to the conflict in the North in our work, and these ancient bog people resonated for me with my land’s
collective victims, without directly looking at them or naming them [3]. And as the bog body works were exhibited, critics pointed to key elements in my practice: Sean Cubitt noted my ‘remarkable care for…materials and their resonance’ [4], while Gemma Tipton exposed 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’ [5]. In my mind’s eye I saw contemporary bodies in the bogs, the infamous ‘Disappeared’ of Northern Ireland’s conflicted culture, 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, the main cloth and the selvedge even, echoed the place of my birth, my land - neither wholly Irish nor wholly British, but liminal, unknowable, fearful and afraid.

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’ [6], but in 1990 I created a site-specific ritual out on the bogland itself dedicated to Nerthus, Northern European tribe goddess of fertility documented by Tacitus, first century AD Roman historian. Tacitus noted too the ritual drowning in bogs of the slaves who washed the sacred cloths used for veneration of this deity. I recognized the ritual repetition of staining, washing and death as a mantra in Irish contemporary culture.

Both Tacitus and respected 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 of 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 [7]. 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 a toothed and ravenous vagina dentata, a Máthair Éire or Mother Ireland, a Síl-
na-gig figure; spawning and interring, nurturing and incarcerating, exposing and castigating, a goddess of martyrdom and of blood sacrifice, emblematic of sacred repression and the pious humility of acceptance. But these also began to articulate the multiple confusions of identity – virgin, vessel, mother, martyr, whore, castrator, and harbinger of death, the banshee – that women in contemporary end of twentieth century Ireland were grappling with. And as the Northern Troubles played out the relentless repetition of devastation, suffering, atrocity and execution, the social context of the island of Ireland 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 Ireland’ 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.

The Ireland of the 1980s and early 1990s was 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 Women and Children’s Homes. 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 [8].

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 [9]. 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 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.

Cultural silence in my environment was broken by other voices beginning to whisper, and even to begin to speak. Derry film-maker Margo Harkin’s Hush-a-Bye Baby (1990), set in Derry in 1984, is an example of how Irish feminist creatives were contributing to a developing, painful, national conversation about sexuality and women’s rights in Ireland: Hush-a-Bye Baby “was directly influenced by the moral panic which beset Ireland during the first abortion referendum in Ireland in 1983” [10]. 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 created that cold dead newborn on the ice and his pitiful haemorraging child-mother, a land and culture that Enda Kenny, current Irish Taoiseach / Prime Minister, referred to in 2013 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”” [11]. But stories of cruelty and intolerance have continued to surface since, and instances indeed persist even today.

In the 2012 case of Galway woman Savita Halappanavar, a prolonged but unsalvageable miscarriage was allowed to continue without abortive intervention, with consequent development of fatal septic shock in the mother [12]. Medical termination would have averted Savita’s death, but uncertainty and contention still prevail in Ireland. 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. About 4500 women a year are known to travel to Britain from the whole island of Ireland for terminations [13]. There is renewed pressure from Irish citizens at home and abroad for repeal of the vexed Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution (#repealthe8th), but in Northern Ireland the Assembly chose in early 2016 to vote against legalising abortion in cases of fatal foetal abnormality only, where medical diagnosis indicates the foetus will die anyway either in the womb or shortly after birth. North and south of the border it seems women are still to blame.

Catherine Nash wrote of my textile practice’s concern with the ‘immobilising and vulnerable nature of motherhood…a deep vein of guilt running through Irish society for women…’ [14]. She recognised that in struggling to make sense of my land and culture, 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 (I had been working through)…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’ [15]. 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.

_The Big Red_ (1994) was a large-scale, conceptually significant and cathartic work for my overall practice. Aidan Dunne’s review captured the essence of this work, which addressed the less predominantly discussed issues of paternal absence in Ireland:

…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…a formidable piece…[16]
My land and culture mythologises and celebrates an ideal of maternity – the combination of the ideal mother and the ideal fetus – *in extremis*. Mother Ireland enshrines the notion of land as woman, and Irish nationhood is heavily associated and constitutionally enscribed by an essentialist idea of female destiny as motherhood. James Connolly, leader of the Irish Citizen Army, at Dublin’s General Post Office in O’Connell Street, during the Irish Easter Rising 1916 was wounded defending the national mother. His shirt, worn during the fighting in Dublin before his capture and execution by British firing squad while seated in a chair, is preserved in the National Museum of Ireland, and is a key and understudied textile artifact representing a very significant moment in the Irish nation's history, a history that has still many cycles of evolution to process for Ireland to meet its full social and democratic potential as a proud and egalitarian republic.

The fabric of the island, and its culture, is – like Connolly’s shirt – 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 [17]. 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 [18], and resisting – like prolonged death throes or the never-ending-ness of a death-rattle – the body’s ultimate erasure [19].

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’ [20], and 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 *Healing Through Remembering* project audited over four thousand material, social and political cultural artifacts of the Troubles [21], and my *Stained 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 [22].

Paramilitary balaclavas; bulletproof flak jackets; 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 [21]. 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. A savage anointment, a ritual punishment for a perceived sexual transgression. 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
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. 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’ [24].

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 and sectarian polemic most associated with Northern Ireland. My land, my cloth, my body and my culture, continues to struggle for equality of citizenship, social justice, human rights, and full reproductive autonomy. When we accept that Ireland herself is a cloth, a bloodied and stained cloth, marked irreversibly by history, conflict and abuse, and bloodied by its own repression and denial of all her people’s rights and needs, then – polemical, didactic or reflective, with more compassion, empathy, humility and heart – we just might make peace with our past.

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Figures

**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:** *James Connolly’s shirt* 1916 Collection of the National Museum of Ireland

**Figure 6:** *Father Daly’s handkerchief, Bloody Sunday 1972* (courtesy Museum of Free Derry)