

## Cheeky Witnessing

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### Abstract

Feminists witness legal worlds as they observe, document, and share nothing less than the reproduction of life itself. The world of the abortion trail, where people and things move across borders to change life’s reproduction, has generated a rich plurality of feminist witnessing. In observing how feminist activists improvise with sources, figures and objects of legal consciousness on the abortion trail, this paper seeks to contribute to critical understanding of that plurality, particularly as it emerges in diaspora space. Focusing on Murphy’s concept of immodest witnessing, with its attention to bodies, protocols and apparatuses as constituents of knowledge, the paper thinks with the diasporic feminist activist performance group, Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A., about how they used self-examination, collective collaboration, and knowledge-sharing on the trail to repeal of Ireland’s Eighth Amendment. The paper argues that their improvisation

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with legal consciousness of reproductive choice enacts ‘cheeky witnessing’. Cheeky witnessing has three dynamics as a method of observation. First, it is messy and irreverent in innovating with names to display the mixed genealogies of sources of feminist knowledge. Second, cheeky witnessing generates novel subject-figures, such as migrant cleaners, who make knowing connections between different reproductive labourers as observers of the trail in diaspora space. Third, cheeky witnessing places funny objects, knickers in this instance, so as to join up particular public locations and make them more, if unevenly, comfortable for sexual and reproductive bodies. Cheeky witnessing show us how committed and partial practices play a role in speaking across interests and experiences, in stretching the legal imagination, and in sustaining the everyday grind of making a better world.

### **Introduction: Improvised legal witnessing on the abortion trail**

Our actions often demonstrate a cheeky irreverence towards patriarchal conventions and playfully challenge conventional constructions of femininity.<sup>2</sup>

How do feminists witness legal worlds as they observe, document, and share the reproduction of life? Activities from global strikes to local actions (Gago, 2018; Arruzza, 2018; Enright, 2015) show how feminists make worldly connections over life’s reproduction as they witness the effects of restrictive laws and efforts to transform those laws. The world of the abortion trail (Sethna and Davis 2019; McQuarrie et al 2018; Calkin and Freeman 2019; Earner-Byrne and Urquhart 2018; Fletcher 2017; Duffy et al 2018; Rossiter 2009; Reagan 2000), where people and things move across borders and legalities to change life’s reproduction, has generated a significant collection of such worldly connections with repeal of the Eighth Amendment in Ireland (Kennedy 2018; NicGhabhann 2018; Fletcher 2018).<sup>3</sup> In thinking with feminist activist performance group Speaking of

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<sup>2</sup> Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. ‘Why IMELDA? What we do’, <https://www.speakingofimelda.org> [last accessed 14 September 2019].

<sup>3</sup> The Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution, which equated the life of the ‘unborn’ with the life of the pregnant woman and prevented the liberalization of

I.M.E.L.D.A. about the use of sources, subject-figures and objects of legal consciousness to witness the abortion trail during the campaign for repeal, this paper contributes to feminist understanding of witnessing as a practice of knowledge generation (Haraway, 1988, 2018; Murphy, 2004, 2012). As witnesses observe, document and share their concerns, the knowledge they generate cuts across legal boundaries in interesting ways, and provides further resources for ‘imagining and actualising’ (Cooper, 2013, p. 35) other worlds. Feminist accounts of witnessing have addressed such cuts by giving us a distinction between the modest witness who observes impartially as if from nowhere (Haraway, 1988, 2018), and the immodest witness who begins observation partially with self-examination (Murphy, 2004, 2012). This work knows that witnessing will vary depending on its sexual, race, class and other dynamics, and on the tools and apparatuses through which it takes place (Murphy, 2015). Here I contribute to fleshing out that variety by capturing a kind of witnessing that is generated through cross-generational, anti-colonial and migrant-led situated commitments, as it draws on improvisation and legal consciousness in observing the abortion trail and the call for repeal.

I focus on Murphy’s account of the immodest witness (2004; 2012) as a point of departure because her account shows us how feminist activists have developed epistemological alternatives to the neutral observation of the modest witness, who claims impartiality in generating knowledge ‘from nowhere.’ Through committed and partial practices such as vaginal self-examination, the immodest witness displays her body as a constituent of knowledge, and contributes to social change by unsettling medical control of gynaecological knowledge and collaborating in choreographing protocols for feminist sharing of technoscientific tools. This feminist witnessing is also significant because it rejects the distance between observer and observed that has come to be associated with accounts which witness suffering (e.g. Rentschler, 2004; see also Hartman 1997; Silva 2013), with all their potential for sexual, racial and/or class

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abortion law, was adopted by referendum in 1983 and repealed in 2018. On the legal case for repeal of the Eighth Amendment, see de Londras and Enright (2018).

subjection. Here I argue that this feminist witness, who is entangled as subject-object in the conditions which produce her immodest self-examination, takes a variety of forms depending on the elements of the entanglement. I hold on to Murphy's concern for practices of self-examination, collective collaboration and horizontal sharing of expertise, and ask how they materialise through feminist witnessing during the movement for repeal of the eighth amendment.

This paper focuses on Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. to think about this witnessing because they were entangled in the abortion trail and the call for repeal of the Eighth Amendment in particularly fruitful ways. As their own documentation<sup>4</sup> explains, Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. are a London-based feminist direct action performance group who came on the scene of repeal activism<sup>5</sup> in 2013 in order to add improvised performance actions to the collection of activities which criticised the Eighth Amendment and its socio-legal relations. As a feminist collective, they drew on cross-generational experience of feminist, lesbian, queer, anti-racist, anti-colonial, housing and migrant organising to witness the abortion trail and call for repeal and legal respect for reproductive choice. They observed the abortion trail as a half-hidden pathway in diaspora space<sup>6</sup> (Brah, 1996; Walters, 2001; Patchett and Kennan 2016), which has enabled women, girls and non-binary people to work around legalities and become unpregnant, but at a significant material and symbolic cost (Quilty et al 2015; Duffy et al 2017; Kennedy, 2018; MERJ 2018). Their witnessing of the trail as they called for repeal presents an opportunity to identify different techniques and tools of observation as they illustrate feminist understanding of knowledge production, knowledge which also reproduces as it mixes new modes of knowing

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<sup>4</sup> See 'Writing IMELDA', Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. website, <https://www.speakingofimelda.org/writing-and-interviews-by-imelda> [last accessed 15 August 2019]

<sup>5</sup> Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A., like many reproductive justice activists, addressed abortion law across the island of Ireland and did not distinguish between Ireland (the Republic) and Northern Ireland in their activism. However here I focus on their engagement over repeal of the eighth amendment in Ireland, since the latter is the context for this paper.

<sup>6</sup> For Brah, and for Walters and Patchett and Keenan as they apply Brah, diaspora space is a theoretical tool for tracing the effects of encounters between natives and dispersed as they are mixed into being.

legal worlds out of existing ones.

In thinking with Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. about witnessing, I focus on improvisation and legal consciousness as two key concepts which capture key aspects of feminist activist engagement with legal mobilisation, equivalent to the protocols and techno-scientific apparatuses used by Murphy's immodest witness in the context of feminist self-help clinics. As Ramshaw explains, improvisation is a form of non-scripted performance, which appears to be spontaneous and free, but is in fact well-prepared and draws on established patterns of communication (2010; see also Ramshaw, 2013; Ramshaw and Stapleton, 2017). She shows us how thinking about law through the lens of improvised theatre allows the observer to see different kinds of knowledge being put into conversation with each other. Law may tell itself a story of its own commitment to rule-based scripts, but also has moments of drawing on hidden knowledge and generating responses, which appear spontaneous and spur of the moment. As feminist performance activists, Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. called for legal reform by drawing on the rhetorical, affective register of law's theatricality (Harrington, 2017; Goodrich, 2011; Peters, 2014). They encouraged audiences to see the ridiculousness of a law, which denied pregnant people the value of their own gestational labour. As they explain in their own documentation (2015; 2018), they improvised in the sense of adapting their partially scripted actions on the 'spur of the moment' during their performance. But this paper also examines how they improvised with names, figures, and objects, as their actions mixed a scripted call for autonomy with non-scripted reproductive knowledge of migration, domestic labour, state inhospitality, and feminist support networks.

I adopt Halliday and Morgan's understanding of legal consciousness as 'the background assumptions about legality, which structure and inform everyday thoughts and actions' (2013, 2; see also Harding, 2011; Ewick and Silbey, 1998), in using legal consciousness to capture legal beliefs displayed by Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. More particularly I use Halliday and Morgan's identification of dissenting collectivism as a kind of legal consciousness, which has three strands to it: beliefs in a) the illegitimacy of state law, b) an alternative conception of law beyond the state, and c) a gaming approach to law. Speaking

of I.M.E.L.D.A. adopt a dissenting collectivism as their actions mobilised collective dissent from positive state law in the form of the Eighth Amendment, with a consciousness of being for legal norms of autonomy and reproductive justice, while gaming with legal sources, figures and objects. I argue that thinking through how Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. improvise with these aspects of legal consciousness as they witness the abortion trail through their actions, helps us see another kind of witnessing: cheeky witnessing.

Cheeky witnessing is like Murphy's immodest witnessing in using bodily display and self-examination as constituents of knowledge. But this witnessing is cheeky more than immodest because it is messy, fleshy and humorous in its innovative use of names, subject-figures and clothes, rather than body-parts, protocols and speculums, in conjuring up a feminist collective subjectivity who examines and knows the trail. Cheeky witnessing displays the messy, irreverent genealogies of feminist kinship as it engages in novel naming practices, which work as bold knots of citation. Secondly, cheeky witnessing fleshes out connections between different kinds of reproductive labour as it observes the trail with innovative subject-figures, such as migrant domestic cleaners, in diaspora space. Thirdly, cheeky witnessing uses the generous comfort of humour in generating new transnational circuits as it places objects of clothing, knickers in this instance, so as to connect up particular public locations and make them more, if unevenly, comfortable for sexual and reproductive bodies. Cheeky witnessing show us how committed and partial practices play a role in speaking to the disinterested, in stretching the legal imagination, and in sustaining the everyday grind of making a better world.

### **Messy genealogies: Citing Imelda's sources**

Knots of citations for me are ways of insisting on messy genealogies – lateral, vertical, and patterned in other sorts of cat's cradle games. (Haraway, 2010, p. 53, fn1)

We sought to present each piece as both stand-alone and potentially in conversation with any number of other pieces within the collection. (Quilty, Kennedy and Conlon, 2015, p. 15)

One simple yet complex way in which Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. witness the abortion trail is with their name. Their name improvises in a manner that is bold, irreverent and messy as it strays from more conventional naming and citation practices, and uses feminist knowledge of the trail along the way. They take a speech act as their name and announce themselves as a collective subjectivity. They are Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A., and generators of conversations that focus on Imelda. This section shows how the reference to Imelda works as one of Haraway's knots of citation (2010, p. 53, fn1) as it draws on three different sources of knowledge. In drawing on different and multiple sources, Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. participate in a lineage of academic feminist practice, which is committed to displaying the variety of actors across 'academic, activist, NGO, political, media and literary' sectors 'involved in shaping and contesting the terms of the abortion debate in Ireland and beyond' (Quilty, Kennedy and Conlon, 2015, p. 14). To summarise the references before analysing them more fully, the first and most obvious reference is to Imelda as an ordinary woman, a reference which seemingly requires little explanation and operates as a feminist common sense as a result. The second reference is to Imelda as the code name for access to the feminist migrant support of the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group (IWASG). The third is indicated by the punctuated form, as it turns IMELDA into the acronym I.M.E.L.D.A. or Ireland Making England the Legal Destination for Abortion, a reference to the failure of the postcolonial sovereign state to make abortion available at home. I argue that in adopting this knotted approach to citation, they enact Haraway's 'messy genealogies' and avoid the kind of 'citational containment' which Hemmings critiques as an aspect of the progress narrative of much feminist theory (2005, p. 124; 2011). Rather than suggest that different sources of knowledge are separate, hierarchical and transcendental, Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. use sources of everyday legal consciousness in layered, horizontal, and entangled ways (see further Bakshi et al 2016). As they mix these sources, they bring a new collective subject into being.

In announcing themselves as those who will speak of people who bear the common Irish name of Imelda, they cite ordinary Irish womanhood as a contributing knowledge-producer on the trail. This citation practice draws on the

standpoint approach in feminist epistemology (Harding, 1992; Haraway, 1988), which holds that knowledge is incomplete unless the standpoint of the subject of knowledge is foregrounded. This approach continues to underpin academic methods, such as feminist judgments or expertise by experience, even if the narration of experiential standpoint has become more scrutinized (e.g. Scott, 1991; Hill Collins 1990). On the abortion trail, hearing from and about women and pregnant people continues to be important in countering the foetocentric strain of everyday legal knowledge, and making the differential impact of abortion restriction visible (MERJ, 2018).

The 'speaking' commits the speakers to an active relationship with Imelda, to an activity which counters silence about the women at the centre of the drama (Fletcher, 1995), while allowing Imelda her silence at the same time (see further Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010). The act of solidarity is to take the burden of speech away from Imelda by speaking *of* her, not for her, not with her, not about her, but of her. In doing so, Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. take Imelda out of the postcolonial national narrative which constitutes her as an 'involuntary patriot' (Enright 2016, p. 38), the woman who lives, mothers, and dies, for Ireland (Gray 1996, p. 87). Like Murphy's immodest witness, they invoke 'woman-observer' simultaneously as subject and object. They observe Imelda as an object of knowledge-generation, and they become the Imeldas, the name of the feminist collective subject (Brah, 2002, p. 41) by which they are known colloquially, as they perform and speak of Imelda. This naming practice brings the citation full circle as the object cited becomes the author-subject doing the citing, naming and performing, and constitutes the immodest witness anew as a collective self in a relationship of speech with the observed-object. Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. improvise with legal consciousness as they call for legal respect of autonomy, but as a feminist collective acting in solidarity and through a speech of connection, rather than as feminist individuals.

To speak of Imelda is also to reference the code name that was used by the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group (IWASG) in the 1980s when they provided a phone-line of support from their London base to Irish women travelling there for abortion care (Rossiter, 2009). In providing this 'citational

history' (Tyler, 2013, p. 223; see also NicGhabhann, 2018, p. 560), they're drawing attention to the contribution of support groups, as distinct from protest actions, in making out the trail. In the 1980s, feminist support for abortion-seeking women was driven underground as anti-abortion activists took cases against students unions and counseling helplines, and won (Connolly, 2003, pp. 155-183; Smyth 2005). They constituted a kind of 'network of escape', making movement possible, reducing risks, and holding onto a 'vital wager', as Gago puts it when considering the significance of migration routes from Bolivia to Argentina (2018, p. 339). Open Line Counselling and the Women's Information Network provided underground assistance in Ireland, and IWASG, ESCORT and LASS provided assistance in Britain (Fletcher, 2017; Duffy, this volume). While Liverpool-based LASS and ESCORT did not bear particular traces of diaspora organizing, IWASG shared a diasporic consciousness with its Spanish equivalent at the time (Rossiter, 2009; see also *Feminist Review* no. 29, 1988). They eased the transition from the experience of being 'cast out' of Ireland to the experience of being helped access abortion in a strange place, by telling the caller to ask for Imelda and to look for a woman wearing red when she arrived at the port, airport or train station. One of Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A.'s regular conference pieces is a performance of IWASG's phone-line and the ways it sought to forge connections in an unstable and insecure reproductive environment. As they perform a feminist archive of the trail, the phone-line is acknowledged as a key feminist method of getting information to people, whatever the legal restrictions on that information. The phone as the tool of the 'Telecom Eireann Mother', trying to maintain relations with her far flung children from home (Gray, 1996, p. 88), becomes a link between generations of feminists and the women they support. Such performances archive the trace of feminist support and turn it into a resource for others. But they also mark the transition from a more fearful period of censorship and hidden abortion information on the trail, towards the time of Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. when information is lawful if regulated, and feminists are seeking the provision of abortion care at home.

To speak of Imelda is also to refer to I.M.E.L.D.A. as an acronym for 'Ireland Making England the Legal Destination for Abortion'. The capitalisation

and punctuation are the means of improvisation here, an innovation which adds another twist in the tale, while drawing on a long post-colonial history of shameful dependence (Smyth, 2005; Smyth, 2014), and of feminist critique of that dependence. As Perry-Kessarlis says (2019), determining the pattern of words is a design choice, which plays a role in how legal knowledge is communicated. Capitalised and/or punctuated<sup>7</sup> I.M.E.L.D.A. hints at the claim that is acronymised, and encourages the reader to ask what IMELDA stands for in a call for curiosity and public engagement. In his consideration of the specter of law, Goodrich identifies the 'obvious yet generally overlooked features' of letters as important starting points for understanding coded statements and legal enigmas (2011, p. 774). The acronym is on the one hand a lightly coded critique of Ireland's gendered inhospitality while relying on others for care of its own. On the other this coded statement charts a transition in how colonial relations are reproduced in postcolonial times and diaspora spaces. Ireland is portrayed as a state-subject, a subject who 'makes England' and performs the postcolonial achievement of having overturned its colonial object status. But in making England the destination for abortion, the state is not (yet) sovereign in its management of its population's reproductive wishes. In this instance, the speaking is a careful, improvised arrangement of letters, capitals and fullstops in a design which invites questions and critique as it references the ongoing making and re-making of colonial and postcolonial relations.

This naming practice is improvisational in Ramshaw's sense in that it appears novel, spontaneous and adaptable (2010; 2013), but draws on well-established feminist patterns of communication. It is a novel naming practice which recognises experiential knowledge, acknowledges its feminist foremothers, and criticises states for their failures to care for women *while* seeing those states as implicated in colonial histories. As they improvise with a legal consciousness of women who have sought out 'England' as a destination for abortion, and of

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<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the Imeldas punctuate the name and sometimes they do not, as may be observed on their website. This messiness has a role in illustrating the subtle plurality of names that apply to the one group. It is not 'wrong' to use one form over another, rather the form used will depend on the dynamic of writing that's foremost at the time.

the women who helped them (O'Malley, 2019, p. 25), they draw on the pleasurable, playful and plural practice of naming and renaming (Smyth, 1989). Their naming practice not only performs a migrant and diasporic feminist collectivity in the here and now, but also joins with past iterations of feminist subjectivity, as it 're-arranges the sensible' (Calkin, 2019, p. 11; Enright, 2015; Enright, this volume; see further Gunaratnam, 2013, p. 16). Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A.'s name holds traces of multiple forms of feminist knowledge in itself as its knot of citation invokes Imelda as an everyday generator of speech, as the code for feminist support, and as an acronym for postcolonial failure.

This kind of self-naming through knotted citation is a form of witnessing in Murphy's sense (2004), since it is a process of generating knowledge through self-examination. But this examined-self witnesses differently, since she speaks as a collective self in solidarity with aborting women, a collective self who has emerged from cross-generational feminist support on the abortion trail, and holds the failures of the legal system to account. This pattern of citation is a feminist alternative to what Haraway calls the 'textual reproductive technology of single=parent self-birthing' with its insistence on purebred descent from the fathers (2010, 53). It is irreverent and messy in improvising with names and reproducing with different sources of legal consciousness as it fills out Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A.'s commitment to cheekiness and challenges law's exclusions. This cheeky witness regenerates from those sources and brings a collaborative, cross-generational, migrant and anti-colonial femininity of dissenting engagement into being on the trail.

### **Cleaner figures: Connecting the reproductive labourers of diaspora space**

Those who prate glibly about the 'sacredness of the home' and the 'sanctity of the family circle' would do well to consider what home in Ireland to-day is sacred from the influence of the greedy merchant spirit, born of the system of capitalist property; what family spirit is unbroken by the emigration of its most gentle and loving ones. (Connolly, 1915)

Drawing on the traditional association of the Irish female migrant labourer with cleaning work, Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. used knickers to give the Irish embassy a good old wipe down.<sup>8</sup>

Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. use a range of subject-figures, or ‘performed image[s] that can be inhabited’ (Murphy, 2012, p. 74), including female bishops, rogue roses, and feminist revolutionaries, in witnessing the abortion trail through their performance actions. One of their regular subject-figures is the Irish migrant cleaner, dressed in red, wearing a headscarf, and cleaning up around her. In conjuring up Imelda as a migrant domestic cleaner who knows about the abortion trail, they put a feminist figuring to work in interesting ways. Ahmed’s killjoy (2017) and Murphy’s immodest witness provide examples of a fluid feminist figure who acquires form as she moves through discursive practices. The killjoy<sup>9</sup> and the immodest witness generate knowledge from where they are, while turning that knowledge into an abstract form that can be handed on for another to use, and may contribute to changing the conditions of its own production. For Murphy tracking the complicities and promises of the figure of the immodest witness means beginning with located experiences, and recognizing knowledge as partial, interested and incomplete, in order to minimize the distortions of standpoints which assume impartiality (2012, p. 98).

Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A.’s figure of the migrant domestic cleaner is similarly conjured up anew through feminist practice, as a subjectivity who knowingly moves in and out of women’s experiences, including her own, as she crosses borders in diaspora space. One of the key places that audiences may encounter this figure of the migrant domestic cleaner is in the you tube video of ‘The Quiet Woman?’,<sup>10</sup> a performance action which they improvised, filmed and

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<sup>8</sup> Knickers For Choice <https://www.speakingofimelda.org/knickers-for-choice> [last accessed 14 August 2019].

<sup>9</sup> Ahmad’s figure of the feminist killjoy turns that which she is accused of – killing joy – into her modus operandi, and is cited as an inspiration by Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. on the website.

<sup>10</sup> Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. ‘The Quiet Woman?’, 23 September 2014, available to view here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=8&v=cEkD\\_cWgxaE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=8&v=cEkD_cWgxaE) (film credit Kevin Biderman) [last accessed 14 August 2019]

used to launch the Knickers For Choice social media campaign.<sup>11</sup> The video follows the actions of a group of women dressed in red, wearing headscarves, as they 'clean up' the Irish Embassy in London and hang knickers for choice on its façade. The women who call for choice and refuse to be quiet, appear to be a curious collection of happy housewives and glamorous migrant cleaners. As they hang laundry and clean up public buildings, they connect different kinds of sexual and reproductive labour and make these connections the basis of their knowing call for choice. They are migrant cleaners, domestic goddesses, glamorous sexual beings, and feminist activists dressed in trade-mark red, all at the same time.

When Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. perform as migrant cleaners turned feminist activists, the consciousness of cleaning with which they improvise, moves across a history of homely reproductive labour in Ireland and a history of market participation as migrant cleaners in Britain. When they are irreverent and bold in making their own of the embassy's façade, they draw on the sexualisation of the domestic goddess and migrant worker and repurpose it as cheek: as a daring call on state authorities to clean up their act. 'The Quiet Woman?' performance draws on these material practices and romantic stereotypes, mixes them, and fleshes out a new irreverent subject-figure. The performance is seen to draw on cleaning practices in two ways. The participants perform acts of cleaning as they dust and hang laundry, and differentiate themselves from the Irish housewife that we see happily performing her domestic duties in a film extract mixed in at the beginning. They do this in a context where the activism and radical consciousness of domestic labourers has often gone unseen (Walsh, 2012; Connolly, 1915). Rather women's role as domestic labourers has been hyper-visible in its romantic celebration inside and outside of law, a hyper-visibility which continues to inform the public valuing of reproductive labour. The performance of cleaning invokes a history of having installed women as reproductive and domestic labourers 'at the heart of the patriarchal and autarkic formation that was nationalist Ireland' (Harrington 2005,

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<sup>11</sup> See Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A., Knickers for Choice <https://www.speakingofimelda.org/knickers-for-choice>, discussed in more detail in the next section.

431). By improvising with cleaning they game with a legal consciousness of cleaning and related domestic activities as the celebrated contributions to 'woman's life within the home'. Such performances also bear witness to cleaning as a means of punishment, one used by state and church against so-called 'fallen' women as they were detained and required to work in the Magdalene Laundries (Gallen, 2019; Gleeson, 2017; Fischer, 2016; Justice for Magdalenes, 2013; O'Rourke, 2011; Smith, 2007).

The use of an extract from the 1952 film 'The Quiet Man' adds to the improvisation with a legal consciousness of cleaning by moving it backwards in time and westwards in space. Sawyer (2008) shows how films and film extracts work as 'diaspora resources' as they provide an alternative reality which enables diasporic audiences to identify differences and particularities in their lived situations. The clip associates a particular celebration of cleaning housewifeliness with the 1950s and with the West of Ireland as a site of return for Irish migrants who had gone to the US. The Quiet Man was directed by John Ford with John Wayne as Sean Thornton in the title role and Maureen O'Hara as Mary Kate Danaher, the woman who agrees to marry Thornton shortly after he returns from the US to Galway (Gillespie, 2002). The extract shows Maureen O'Hara singing as she goes around cleaning up the house, evoking the stereotype (Walters, 2001, p. 23) of a domesticated, cheerful, red-headed, 'glamourpuss' wife to the quintessential man's man, John Wayne, and performing Irish 'housewifization' (Mies, 1986; Federici, 2004). The use of the film clip invokes an Ireland that is produced by Hollywood, and an Ireland that consumes US popular culture. When Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. include O'Hara as Mary Kate as their starting point, she is performing an Irishness that moves between home and diaspora audiences and is racialised<sup>12</sup> through these processes. O'Hara's character is based in Galway, not just part of an Ireland that is 'beyond the pale' (Ware, 2015), but part of the *West* of Ireland, that geographical region which is very Irish, and home of a Gealtacht of Irish speakers. Galway housewives are both quintessentially Irish, and the sisters of the domestic labourers and nurses, who

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<sup>12</sup> For a sample of the literature on the racialisation of Irishness see McVeigh 1996; Fletcher 2005; Mac an Ghail 2002.

left Ireland for the homes of the British and the US middle classes, making Irish emigration more feminine than masculine (Ryan, 2002, p. 51; Walters, 2001). As Connolly articulated in the beginning of the twentieth century, the sense of cultural loss of Ireland's 'gentle and loving ones' through emigration was seen to be bound up in the interplay of colonialism and capitalism (1915). Ryan illustrates this by identifying how the loss of breeding stock was a significant cultural trope of gendered emigration in the 1930s (2002). As these cleaner-knowers move between experiences of class-based migration, diasporic dispersal, and sexual and reproductive exile, they reveal the relationship between different types of movement across borders. Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. make a history of migration and disenfranchisement part of abortion's story, and they criticize the state from the perspective of women who clean up after others.

This addition of Irish experience of migration to the US through the use of the film clip is, as Walters notes, one of the features of diaspora space (2001, 102). For Walters, diaspora space makes racialised differentiation visible as the differences between circulations of Irishness across the UK and US contexts, register. Whereas domestic Irish femininity becomes represented as the successful entrepreneurial immigrant who 'becomes white' in the US, domestic Irish femininity in the UK is represented as the service labourer who performs the double burden of keeping the metropole going while sending remittances home. Walters has shown how the role of Irish migrant women as domestic labourers in British diaspora space rendered them less visible (Walters, 2001, p. 102). Mixing these images makes the colonised legacy of the Irish domestic labourer in the UK more explicit, at the same time as it evokes the possibility of movement between different zones and experiences of migration and diaspora (Gray, 2003). It contributes to the gendered, racialisation of Irishness in British diaspora space. There is no disaggregation of the legacy of colonial capitalism from this figure, and no disaggregation of social reproduction as the assembled set of activities through and against which she is constituted.

Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. add another layer to the mixture as they re-figure the domestic cleaner as glamorous, critical and red in her movement through diaspora space. They turn the gaze of shaming and stereotyping back on the Irish

state through their 'clean up your act' message. They game with a consciousness of cleaning as they identify its role in celebrating reproductive labour and punishing sexual freedom, and turn it into a cheeky performance of collective dissent through its distance from a romanticized 1950s version of the west of Ireland and its emergence in British diaspora space. As the performance shows the women cleaning the embassy, and calling for choice, they call on the Irish state to care for women. This cheeky protest performs feminist affective labour as it refuses to embrace the drudgery of cleaning and the suffering of abortion denial, but claims space for domestic labourers who invest energy in others. It is an example of Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A.'s reluctance to rehearse the spectacle of Irish women's suffering and tragic abortions, and resonates with Silva's political-intellectual gesture of a refusal to rehearse the 'spectacle of black suffering' (Silva, 2013; see also Hartman, 1997). As they turn away from a consciousness of suffering they bring a different kind of witnessing into being, a witnessing which connects up different experiences of reproductive labour through cheeky acknowledgment of the role of cleaning in generating legal subjects-figures.

### **Funny objects: Knickers as placemakers**

The [Pink Chaddi Campaign] may well mark a shift in the language of feminist politics in India, where the comfort of 'speaking for' underprivileged women that the movement has always had is being challenged, and the question of representation itself is being interrogated. (Niranjana, 2010, p. 234)

Knickers... are both everyday and hidden, humorous and mischievous. (NicGhabhann, 2018, p. 559)

Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. improvise with a variety of objects – clothes, couches, cases, chains – in marking out the live materiality of the abortion trail. Their first public action involved suitcases as they crashed a conference on the Irish diaspora in London, and occupied space there as they told the audience about the wrongs of the abortion trail. In making suitcases part of their action, they were following in the footsteps of Irish activists at home, whose artworks have made the suitcase a key 'sticky symbol' of exile for abortion and the state's failure to accommodate people at home (Campbell and Clancy, 2018; Calkin,

2019; NicGhabhann, 2018). The use of the couch on the Referendum Road Trip,<sup>13</sup> their final action before repeal, in travelling around Ireland and hosting a pop-up chat show, drew on the couch as an object which moves across homes and television studios to mark out a private-in-public place for political conversation. This section argues that these improvisations with objects of legal consciousness are a kind of transnational feminist placemaking, a placemaking that uses some of the dynamics of Black placemaking to 'provide sites of play, pleasure, celebration, and politics' and shift otherwise oppressive geographies (Hunter et al 2016, p. 4). They witness by drawing out the hidden knowledges of these objects and using them to make comforting and funny, if unsettling, connections across borders (Murphy, 2015). I focus on how the #KnickersForChoice<sup>14</sup> campaign adopted this pattern of careful selection of objects in connecting different kinds of knickers-wearers and in cultivating solidarity across a diaspora space that had become more global (Gray, 2003). As these cheeky witnesses joke, they improvise with the partially visible meanings of knickers as legal objects. They observe their points of connection, provide comfort by using knickers to stage actions of collective dissent, and share these actions through social media.

I argue that when Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. joke with knickers, these objects come into view as everyday items that move across legal boundaries. They are made into campaigning tools and signs of solidarity, while also being evidence of sexual humiliation and the flimsiness of consent, and symbols of the moral punishment and forced labour endured by the likes of the Magdalene women. The joke makes these painful histories the object of humour and dissent, as the Imeldas reclaim their knickers and use them to claim space and to poke fun at state actors and their places of work (Enright, 2014). As Walsh explains, knickers for choice was inspired by the Indian pink chaddi campaign (Walsh, this volume), a feminist action taken in response to an attack by men on

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<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.speakingofimelda.org/referendum> [last accessed 14 August 2019].

<sup>14</sup> Speaking of IMELDA website, 'Knickers for Choice', <https://www.speakingofimelda.org/knickers-for-choice> [last accessed 14 August 2019].

women in a pub, because they were apparently ‘subverting the norms of Indian decency’ (Gupta, 2016; Kapur, 2012; Niranjana, 2010). Nisha Susan started a Facebook group entitled ‘Consortium of pub-going, loose and forward women’, and within 24 hours the pink chaddi campaign was born with a plan to send chaddis (panties or knickers in Hindi) to Pramod Muthalik. Muthalik was then leader of the right wing Hindu Group Sri Ram, who had threatened to forcibly ‘marry off’ straight couples dating in public on Valentine’s Day in 2009. Knickers for Choice took the Indian feminists’ idea of sending and posting chaddis and developed it into a series of actions with knickers. The joke takes different forms as it moves from inspirational Indian social media campaign to Imelda’s action outside the Irish embassy in London, to participation in the Abortion Rights Campaign’s march for choice in Dublin, to disruption of the Taoiseach’s<sup>15</sup> dinner at a political fundraiser, to a borderless social media campaign. The campaign took on a life of its own as the invitation to drape knickers in some public place, photograph them, and post them on social media thickened the diasporic space with a dissenting support for cheeky Irish women (Enright, 2014). It resonated with other cheeky hashtag activism of the time in ‘doing feminism in the network’ (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015) and creating online spaces for feminist critique and laughter. Comedian Gráinne Maguire engaged in a kind of immodest menstrual display as she tweeted the Taoiseach with live updates on her periods (NicGhabhann, 2018), and encouraged others to do the same, in response to the government’s apparent interest in wombly operations.

For NicGhabhann (2018), the Knickers campaign involves the occupation of public space through the generation of counter-spectacle and carnivalesque aesthetics in order to draw attention to concerns with the Eighth Amendment. She understands the Imeldas’ counter-spectacular actions as a re-appropriation of scripted narratives of place and space to suit the purposes of the user. I build on this by arguing that this re-appropriation becomes a skilled feminist improvisation through the cheeky connection of these placed objects. This connection displaces an old public script of using knickers to shame and mistreat

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<sup>15</sup> The Irish Prime Minister, who was then Enda Kenny, leader of the second largest and centre-right political party, Fine Gael.

women and makes a 'hidden transcript' (Scott 1990) of pro-choice solidarity appear, with its layered histories of cross-generational feminist support, proud feminine sexuality, and reclaimed cleaning power.

The Knickers for Choice campaign did this first by clearing a space, as Kapur argues happened with the Pink Chaddi Campaign (2012), for a feminist presence in and against heteropatriarchal capitalist culture. But it did more than that. As the Imeldas encourage others to place their knickers publicly, to photograph and share them on social media, they improvised with the layered meanings of knickers. Knickers have been known to work as objects of humiliation, means of titillation, sites of labour, and items of everyday wear. Knickers and their capacity to dress cheeks and vulvas appear as legal objects that stray across everyday life, in and out of courtrooms, as they represent women's apparent openness to sex. During a rape trial in November 2018, several months after the referendum vote, the defence barrister used the kind of knickers a woman wore as evidence that she might have consented. This was widely reported in the Irish media and raised as a concern in the Irish Parliament.<sup>16</sup> Knickers protests see knickers as a material symbol of everyday sexual humiliation and use them to remind their audiences of the stakes involved in choices over knickers.

But knickers are also frivolous and fun, as they caress sexual body parts. It is this sense of knickers, or chaddis to be more accurate, which Gupta (2016) attributes to the Pink Chaddi Campaign in her critique of its consumerist aspects, and which Kapur uses to characterise the campaign as a kind of 'feminism-lite' (2012). Rather than understand knickers campaigns as 'feminism-lite' however, we might think of them as one of a range of assembled practices, which have a role to play in generating the socio-legal environment for meaningful change. If, as Lloyd claims (2008) much of post-Marxist theory concerns itself with understanding the failure to produce a transnational revolutionary subjectivity,

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<sup>16</sup> Marie O'Halloran, 2018. TD holds up thong in Dáil in protest at Cork rape trial comments. The Irish Times. 13 November; available here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/oireachtas/td-holds-up-thong-in-dail-in-protest-at-cork-rape-trial-comments-1.3696564> [last accessed 14 August 2019].

we need to be attentive to the possibility that transformative subjectivities might not be wearing clothes we recognise. Moreover, characterizing knickers protests as the actions of neoliberal consumers or 'feminism-lite' risks trivializing such interventions. When they are understood as 'mere' instances of self-expression or demands for recognition, their materiality drops out of the picture. Berlant and Warner have previously cautioned about the risk of misrecognizing cultural protests that are the products of fundamentally unequal material relations coupled to heterosexual culture (1998). The knickers of the rape survivor, the sex worker, the abortion-seeker, mobilise a critique of the materiality of a violent heterosexual culture, a violence which routinely deals a second blow as rape survivors are not believed, as sex workers are denied recognition as labourers, as pregnant people are stopped from opting out of gestational labour.

When the Imeldas encourage others to join in the transnational display of knickers they expand diaspora space and constitute a transnational chain of feminist comfort zones. Hunter et al. show how 'Black placemaking' is constituted as they document the different ways that Black Chicago residents transformed 'spaces into places, however ephemeral they may be.' Residents use interaction and meaning to 'shift otherwise oppressive geographies of a city to provide sites of play, pleasure, celebration, and politics' (2016, p. 4). Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A. similarly change public places on the abortion trail, such as the Irish Embassy in London, or the General Post Office (a historic site of national rebellion) in Dublin, in ephemeral, but reverberating (Kuntsman 2012), ways. The Black placemaking of Chicago's residents is 'a corrective to existing accounts that depict urban blacks as bounded, plagued by violence, victims and perpetrators, unproductive, and isolated from one another and the city writ large' (Hunter et al, 2016, p. 21). Imeldas' feminist place-making is also an antidote, but one that is a corrective to a different process of alienation, that of the colonial and postcolonial gendered racialisation of Irish women as meek, passive, ever-suffering and uncivilized (Fletcher, 2005).

Placemaking through Knickers for Choice is a transnational practice which expands the abortion trail beyond diaspora space as relatively distinct and isolated spots are connected through acts of solidarity. As knickers adorn the

post office of the rural Irish village, and the gates in a Dutch city, they join them into this circuit of sexualized and unevenly comfortable places. The improvisation with knickers sees IMELDA use their cheek to make transnational connections across different feminist responses to bodily violence. They invest space with particular Irish and transnational feminist significations. It is an investment which is ephemeral and mobile, but present and recognizable in using a multi-purpose set of tactics which combined transnational solidarity, reverse-shaming, public clean-ups and reverberation across media.

### **Conclusion: On cheeky witnessing**

As cheeky witnessing improvises with legal consciousness, it becomes a novel method of reproducing knowledge, which can be picked up and used in different ways. Through naming and citation, *Speaking of I.M.E.L.D.A.* illustrate how to hold on to established feminist practices of countering silence and foregrounding women's experiences, while innovating. They work with messy genealogies and entangled sources as the speaking takes plural forms and makes Imelda into a connected gendered being, one who lives out her reproductive life in connection with others and in the shadow of states that continue to make and remake colonial relations. Cheeky witnessing also shows us how to draw on cleaning as a gendered, sexualised and racialised means of hiding the value of sexual and reproductive labour, and generate the cleaner of diaspora space as a novel subject-figure who demands that the state clean itself up. Finally, this method of observation places knickers as objects that have the power to humiliate, while also being frivolous, flimsy and funny, and turns them into an everyday sign of transnational solidarity. As witnesses of law, cheeky feminists multiply and mix legal sources, concoct new legal subject-figures, and place legal objects in unsettling yet comforting ways.

As feminist witnessing, this cheeky display builds on Haraway's critique (1988; 2018) and Murphy's theorization of immodest witnessing (2004; 2012; 2015), and shows us another witnessing that participates in the imagination and actualisation of another world (Cooper, 2013). In mixing different legal

consciousnesses together, cheeky witnessing finds ways to multiply and elongate its sense of self, as it performs the possibility of deflating institutional power and making it changeable. The witnessing works through the cheeky body, a body which stretches, calls attention, and comforts through its multiple sources, figures, and clothes, as it makes knowledge circulate. Cheekiness finds ways to keep going in the face of difficult odds, while holding on to the possibility of running away, or stepping sideways out of the scrutinizing light. The multiplicity of that unsettled yet inviting state of cheekiness, means that it might go in different directions, depending how the audience responds to the witness.

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