

The Bleedin' Irish Female Body
Menstrual Activism in Ireland, 1980 & 2015

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I explore two case of menstrual activism. The first took place in Armagh Goal in 1980, when republican women prisoners smeared their menstrual blood on the walls of their prison cells. The second case study took place thirty-five years later when abortion rights activists tweeted details of their menstrual cycles to the Irish taoiseach (prime minister). I examine these case studies with three theoretical frameworks: Gilles Deleuze's question of 'what can a body do?', Judith Butler's vulnerability/resistance paradigm, and the wider field of menstrual activism, using Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs' writing on the subject. I further explore these case studies through the Irish images of the Virgin Mary and the Sheela-na-Gig in order to create a new role model for Irish menstrual activists.

*La menstruación es la única sangre que no nace de la violencia
y es la que más asco te da.*

Menstruation is the only blood that is not born from violence,
yet it is the one that disgusts you the most.
(Schwartz, 2017)

Like our cycles, I imagine menstrual resistance coming forth in waves, sometimes slowly – drip, drip, drip – and sometimes gushing forcefully outward, making a mess, leaving stains. The impulse to write a new story, to resist, to fight back, to destroy conventional narratives of our bodies and sexualities is there, waiting on the margins, impatient, feral. We are out for blood, ready to use out menstruating bodies as weapons, as tools, as markers of the absurd, as performative utterances, as devices of wild and persistent optimism. We are out for blood.

(Fahs, 2016, p. 116)

INTRODUCTION

In Ireland the story of Bobby Sands¹ and the ‘Dirty Protests’ is widely known. Images of the protestors wearing only a blanket and standing in cells covered in their faeces and urine remain a central part of the visual narrative of the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ of the 1980’s. However, it wasn’t until two years ago, when I began researching menstrual activism, that an essay (Campo del Pozo, 2014) drew my attention to the thirty or so women who carried out a similar protest in Armagh Goal, with the addition of their menstrual blood smeared on the walls of their prison cells. Although it received some coverage in newspapers at the time, these ‘bloody protests’ have almost entirely disappeared from the general narrative of the ‘Troubles’. At the same time that I discovered this historical blind spot, feminist events were popping up across Dublin in commemoration of the 1916 rising in Ireland, aiming to rewrite Irish women into the history of Irish independence and republican activism. The story of these thirty Irish republican activists smearing their menses on prison walls stayed with me as I continued to explore current menstrual activism being carried out across the globe.

At the same time that there was a growing interest in uncovering the hidden narratives of women from Ireland’s history, the Irish abortion rights campaign was also working to remove the silence and stigma that surrounds abortion stories.² These two areas of activism came together when Irish abortion rights activists began tweeting their menstrual cycles to the Irish prime minister in 2015.

A large part of menstrual activism fights for menstrual rights in a world which continues to oppress, stigmatise and silence menstruators, thereby – though not necessarily intentionally – focusing on the oppression menstruators face and what is *done* to the menstruating body. However, in this thesis I instead wished to demonstrate what menstruators can do *to* our blood-reviling, blood-hating cultures and societies. How can we reclaim the discourse of what a menstruating body can do, rather than what is done to a menstruating body? While in neither of these case studies were the protestors specifically, or solely, fighting for menstrual rights (instead they were advocating for prisoners’ rights, the republican cause, and abortion rights), their use of menstrual blood as an

¹ Bobby Sands was a prisoner at Long Kesh who died after two months on hunger strike. He also played a prominent role in the Dirty Protests at Long Kesh. During his imprisonment he was elected as an MP in Northern Ireland.

² The REPEAL project’s Instagram page is an example of how the abortion rights campaign is currently telling abortion stories. Across their Instagram page can be found people’s stories of abortion, some of them anonymous, some not (repealproject, 2017).

activist tool transformed the nature of the protests themselves. Looking at these two case studies together we can see the fundamental disruptiveness of menstrual blood. Combining these case studies created an opportunity to explore what a menstruating body can do across two very different spaces of activism – prison cells and twitter feeds – and how menstrual vulnerability can be mobilised into menstrual resistance.

Throughout this analysis I draw on two Irish female icons in order to create a ‘visual’ thread between the Irish context of these protests and my theoretical frameworks and conceptual tools. The first of these icons is the Virgin Mary, a figure which is revered, celebrated and prayed to across Ireland. One cannot go far without finding a grotto³ dedicated to her. She is said not to bleed once a month. The second icon is the Sheela-na-Gig, a lesser-known medieval figure carved onto church doorways across Ireland. The Sheela-na-Gig is depicted squatting and parting her vulva. How is it that the Ireland that never speaks about the vagina and all it secretes, who worships the Virgin Mary as an emblem of what it is to be female, once carved Sheela-na-Gigs onto their churches? These images helped me map the transformation, taking place in both case studies, from menstrual shame, stigma, silence and taboos, into radical self-exposure. I explore how the protestors in both case studies recover the model of Sheela-na-Gig, thereby creating new role models for how to be an Irish menstrual activist. I turn to the words of Gloria Anzaldúa here in order to understand the importance of role models in changing how we think in order to change our worlds,

The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads. (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 109)

Reclaiming menstrual blood as a protective and powerful resistance tool was brought to life for me through the image of the Sheela-na-Gig. I hope that the role models I will explore throughout this thesis (the bloody protestors, the menstrual tweeters, the Virgin Mary and the Sheela-na-Gig) can help to inspire current and future generations of Irish activists to make use of menstrual blood in their activism.

³ The connection between grottos dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the Irish women’s rights and abortion rights campaigns is not hard to make. In 1984 Ann Lovett, a fifteen-year-old girl, was found close to death after giving birth to a baby boy at a grotto. She died later that day in hospital. (Ingle, 2014)

CHAPTER ONE

CONTEXT, THEORY AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER ONE

This chapter will consider the context of both case studies examined in this thesis, as well as the theoretical and methodological frameworks which I will employ in my analysis. Section one will summarise the context of the bloody protest which took place in Armagh Goal in 1980 and the menstrual themed tweets from 2015. Section two will begin with a discussion of the two mythical models which I work with throughout this thesis – Sheela-na-Gig and the Virgin Mary – and outlines the theoretical frameworks which I will use: the question of what a body can do (Deleuze, 1990; Butler and Taylor, 2010), the vulnerability/resistance paradigm (Butler, 2016), the field of menstrual activism (Bobel, 2010, Fahs, 2016), and Cixous’ concept of *écriture féminine* (1991). In section three I will begin by discussing the methods used in this research and the difficulties I encountered using these methods. This will be followed with a discussion of the methodological frameworks employed throughout: centring the body in research (Grosz, 1996), sexual difference (Lykee, 2010), texts as resistance (Leavy, 2007; Cixous, 1991) and diffraction (Haraway in Lykke, 2010; Haraway, 1997).

SECTION I – CONTEXTUALISATION

1. Context of the ‘Bloody Protest’

The Northern Irish Conflict – or the ‘Troubles’ – took place from the late 1960’s to 1998 (when the Good Friday Agreement⁴ was signed), this followed centuries of British colonialism and “wars, religious divisions, power and land ownership shifts” (McAuliffe and Hale, 2010, p. 171). This thirty year period of sectarian violence took place mostly within Northern Ireland between the unionists/loyalists (who mostly identified as Protestant and British) and the republicans (who

⁴ The Good Friday Agreement was an important element of the Northern Irish Peace Process. Through referendums in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland the people were asked to approve the current devolved system of government in Northern Ireland, along with a host of other government institutions and agreements between Northern Irish, Republic of Ireland and British governments.

mostly identified as Catholic and Irish). McAuliffe and Hale describe the narrative of the opposing sides of the conflict as:

The nationalist [republican] narrative is one of dispossession, suffering and oppression by an alien state and people, the loyalist narrative is one of struggles to remain loyal to the crown, the Protestant religion and British identity despite resistance from a hostile and often violent population. (*ibid*, p. 171)

In this thesis I will examine the ‘bloody protest’ which took place in Armagh Gaol, Northern Ireland in 1980. Leading up to this protest was a period of heightened raids by the British authorities on Catholic homes, as well as a number of changes made to the British legal system in Northern Ireland.⁵ As a result, the prison population increased dramatically during the 1970’s,⁶ and since these changes came from the British government they mainly affected the Catholic and republican⁷ population. Until March 1976, individuals who were imprisoned for offences related to the republican movement were treated as political prisoners and granted ‘Special Category Status’ (SCS), which meant an increase of ‘privileges’ while in prison.⁸ However, on March 1, 1976 the British government ended SCS for “offences committed after this date” (*ibid*, p. 2). What followed was a series of protests by the prisoners who had been denied SCS. In Armagh Gaol, where women prisoners were held, this began with prisoners refusing to do work duties, something from which SCS prisoners had been exempt. Taking part in this protest meant losing 50 percent of their remissions, receiving only one food parcel, one letter and one thirty minute visit per month, “[e]ntitlement to anything more was regarded as a privilege.” (Fairweather, et al., 1984, p. 218).

On February 7, 1980, during a surprise search of prisoners’ cells at Armagh Gaol, the “situation exploded” (*ibid*, p. 218). While at lunch, the prisoners were informed their cells were being searched and afterwards, “the women prisoners were searched bodily, beaten, and assigned punishments for their resistance to the searches” (Neti, 2003, p. 79). They were locked up for 24

⁵ These changes included re-introducing internment without trial in 1971, and a 1978 act allowing British soldiers and police to arrest individuals if they had “reasonable belief” they had committed or intended to commit a crime. Furthermore, under the 1978 Act, anyone arrested could be held for 72 hours without the right to see a solicitor, doctor, or make a phone call (Women Against Imperialism, 1980, p. 5). When the accused was eventually tried, the case was decided by a judge sitting without a jury (*ibid*, p. 5).

⁶ Before 1969 there were eight prisoners in Armagh Gaol, while at one stage between 1972-72 there were 120 prisoners, 32 held without trial (Women Against Imperialism, 1980, p. 2).

⁷ Irish republicanism believes that Ireland should be an independent and united republic.

⁸ Political prisoners were granted ‘privileges’ such as free association, recreational and educational facilities, a visit and a parcel a week, no prison work, and no prison uniform (Women Against Imperialism, 1980, p. 12).

hours and when let out for exercise the next day they were told they could not empty their chamber pots. As one of the prisoners Maureen Gibson explains:

There's no toilets and no wash hand basins in the cell, so we were puzzled about this. Again we asked the screws [prison guards] to open up the toilets and again they refused. And so we wondered what they hell we were going to do. The obvious thing was to get rid of it and pour it through the windows or the spy-holes. (Fairweather, et al., 1984, p. 220-221).

The authorities proceeded by boarding up the spy-holes and windows, thus forcing the prisoners to adopt the same tactic as their male counterparts in Long Kesh,⁹ who had been carrying out similar 'dirty protests' since 1978. Rose McAllister recounts her experience of the bloody protest – it is worth quoting McAllister in full in order to paint a picture of the experience of carrying out this protest:

I remember the first day, I'll never forget it, that I had to put my waste on the wall after they boarded all the windows. I was actually physically sick because I didn't realise how you had to steel yourself to do that. I thought that if it was necessary to do it, you could just get it over with, but I didn't realise what it took. It was completely alien to all of us to have to be unclean as far as our bodies were concerned. That first day was a nightmare. Maureen and myself tried to make a laugh of it, but when I had to sit and eat in it – the smell – I cried and said, 'Maureen, this is really awful, isn't it?' I mean who would actually choose to live in that? Who would choose to spend 23 hours a day in filth and shit? But as the days passed it got worse as the cell grew dirtied. The stench was unbearable. Everything was dirty, as we weren't allowed to get washed. *Even when you took your period you had nothing clean to change into.* When you asked for sanitary towels they just threw them into the cells, *and because of the strain some women were taking their periods when they shouldn't have.* I was taking mine every two weeks, but *I never got enough sanitary towels. They were rationed, like everything else...* As the weeks got worse the dirt got worse. Before they boarded up the windows we could see houses in the distance, the sky and other parts of the jail. Then suddenly we couldn't see anything at all except shit. (*ibid*, p. 221-222, italics added).

This quotation illustrates the visceral bodily experience of carrying out the bloody protest. McAllister also hints at some of the key themes which will emerge in this thesis. The italicised text recounts how periods were regulated by prison officials, but also suggests that periods disrupted the patterns of prison control and order. McAllister begins the discussion of the disruptive nature of menstruation which will continue throughout this thesis.

2. Context of the Menstrual Themed Tweets

In 1983 the Eighth Amendment was added to the Republic of Ireland's constitution stating that:

⁹ Long Kesh was one of the names used to refer to the H-Blocks which were the area of Her Majesty's Prison Maze used to hold republican paramilitaries during the Troubles.

The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right. (Eight Amendment of the Constitution Act, 1983)

The consequence of this amendment is that abortions are illegal in Ireland. Women and pregnant people of Ireland have to travel overseas, usually to England, to access abortions. These include not only women who *choose* not to be pregnant, but also survivors of rape or incest, women who are suicidal, or whose pregnancy has fatal foetal abnormalities. Women without access to financial support, who are in abusive relationships, or who are asylum seekers or migrants without the necessary visas, all face difficulties in travelling abroad and therefore suffer disproportionately from this law.

Because it is a *constitutional* ban on abortion it is necessary for a referendum to be held to change the amendment. Activists are currently lobbying government to hold this referendum no later than 2018.

The Irish abortion rights movement has been growing in recent years, adapting and expanding their tactics,¹⁰ and increasingly mobilising the younger generation. In November 2015 comedian Gráinne Maguire decided to turn to comedy, instead of anger, to target the Irish taoiseach (prime minister) Enda Kenny. Calling her uterus “Ireland’s little embassy” she began tweeting the taoiseach details of her menstrual cycle, because:

If they want to control my body, if they feel so comfortable interfering in what happens inside it, they should at least have all the details. So I decided to live-tweet my menstrual cycle to the taoiseach Enda Kenny. Sure, some could argue that it’s none of his business what happens inside my fallopian tubes, but if we took that logic to its conclusion, I wouldn’t need to tweet him in the first place. (Maguire, 2015)

Soon hundreds of Irish menstruators were tweeting @EndaKennyTD details of their monthly flow and this protest reached international audiences.

In chapter three I will explore how Maguire’s use of the menstrual cycle as a tool of protest, against Ireland’s abortion ban, transformed this series of tweets into a reclamation of both the menstruating body and its possibilities to speak/tweet publically about menstruation. It is in this way that these tweets can be compared to the bloody protest in Armagh Goal: they were both using

¹⁰ From jumpers plastered with the word REPEAL to monthly music and comedy events cropping up to raise money for the movement.

the tool of menstruation to protest another cause (prisoner's rights and abortion rights). But I will argue that by choosing this activist tool they were inevitably carrying out menstrual activism at the same time. Throughout the following chapters I will refer to the bloody protest that took place in Armagh as the *bloody protest*, and I will refer to the body of tweets as the *menstrual themed tweets*.

SECTION II – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

1. *Myths of Ireland*

Throughout this thesis I will draw on two mythical Irish female models: Sheela-na-Gigs and the Virgin Mary. I will use these two images in order to visualise how menstrual vulnerability¹¹ (the Virgin Mary) is mobilised into menstrual activism (the Sheela-na-Gig).



Image 1: Sheela-na-Gig

Sheela-na-Gigs are sculptures which depict a squatting woman parting her vulva. They have been found on the doorways of medieval tower houses, churches and holy wells around Ireland (more than a hundred are estimated to still exist today) (BBC, 2017).¹² The meanings of these carvings are multiple and debated, with some suggesting that they were intended as protection from evil and lust, or are symbols of fertility. However, my interest in the Sheela-na-Gig is not the mystery of their meaning but how the Sheela-na-Gig's act of exposing her vulva is a powerful reclamation of the female body, and how this

connects with menstrual activism. Barbara Freitag (2004) writes that statues of Sheela-na-Gigs are crudely and poorly carved which suggests they were the work of local amateur carvers and not skilled stonemasons. She proposes that the Christian Church incorporated this symbol from pagan

¹¹ I understand 'menstrual vulnerability' as the shame, stigma, taboos and silence that surround menstruation in both current day Ireland and the Ireland of the 1980's.

¹² The Heritage Council of Ireland (2017) have recently launched an online map of all existing Sheela-na-Gigs, and an illustrated map and guide of the Sheela-na-Gigs of Ireland is also available in print (Roberts, 2009).

Irish tradition, and thus the Sheela-na-Gig “needs to be seen as some powerful manifestation of continuity of the past” (Freitag, 2004, p. 1). I would like to preserve this idea throughout this thesis: the image of the Sheela-na-Gig can connect us with a past which worshipped menstrual blood and viewed it as a source of power and agency.¹³ In this way we can imagine the Sheela-na-Gig in the words of Hélène Cixous:

Now women *return from afar, from always: from ‘without’, from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond ‘culture’* [...] The little girls and their ‘ill-mannered’ bodies immured, well-preserved, intact upon themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified. But are they ever *seething* underneath! (Cixous, 1991, p. 877, italics added)

Cixous and the Sheela-na-Gig both build upon the inherent power within the feminine. Perhaps if we reclaim the Sheela-na-Gig as a role model for menstrual activism, menstruators can expose all that they are *seething* about.

I will present the image of the Sheela-na-Gig alongside that of the Virgin Mary (of the Catholic tradition). The Virgin Mary became, and continues to be, the emblem of femininity in Irish society. In stark contrast to a pagan past which celebrated menstrual blood in their myths and traditions, the Virgin Mary does not bleed once a month. However, I like to imagine her in the form of the apparition some followers have claimed to have seen with blood flowing from her eyes like tears (see *Image 2*). While this is generally explained as coming from oozing resin discolouring and staining statues and paintings, I like to imagine that this is the Virgin Mary finding *some way* that her menstrual blood might leave her body, tears shed for what a patriarchal religion has done to what was once called the ‘holy blood of life’. Throughout this thesis I will use these two Irish role

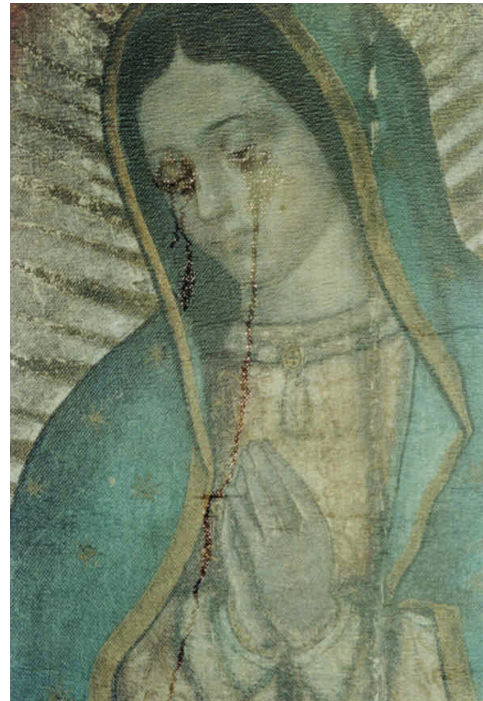


Image 2: Virgin Mary

¹³ In the section on ‘Menstrual Blood’ in the *Women’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* Barbara Walker (1983) discusses how in pagan Ireland alternating female and male dancers would wear red and white, respectively, when dancing in the fairy ring to worship the earth mother, dancing counter-clockwise – or moonwise (Walker, 1983, p. 641). She further writes about “Celtic kings bec[oming] gods by drinking the “red mead” dispensed by the Fairy Queen [...] Medhbh” (Walker, 1983, p. 637). These images of the past suggest that menstrual blood was seen as a powerful actor to be worshipped.

models¹⁴ in order to visualise what a menstruating body can do when it mobilises menstrual vulnerability into menstrual activism.

2. *What Can a Menstruating Body Do?*

One of the key theoretical frameworks that I will employ is Sunaura Taylor and Judith Butler's discussion (2010) of Deleuze's essay *What Can a Body Do* (Deleuze, 1990). In this essay Deleuze suggests that a body might be defined by its "capacity to be affected" (*ibid*, p. 218), and proposes that the body is composed of its relations. Butler further notes that 'what can a body do?' is a different question than those typically asked about the body: what is the body, and what is the difference between the body and the soul? As Butler says, what is interesting about this question is that "it isolates a different set of capacities, instrumentalities or actions", and in doing so thinks of bodies as "assemblages of these ideas, [...] not like we are an essence, or an ideal morphology" (Butler, 2010). Applied specifically to the menstruating body, this question suggests how instead of seeing the menstruating body as damaged, vulnerable, or a lesser version of the 'ideal body' it opens up a different set of capabilities, capacities and possibilities for activism. The body's different and multiple sets of capacities, its relationality and connectivity, as well as its ability to act even when affected, these are all aspects of this question – of what can a body do – which will be explored throughout this thesis.

As I will explain in section three, one of my methodological practices will be to move the menstruating body to the centre of analysis. In thinking about what a body can do I turn to Margrit Shildrick's argument that the "devaluation of corporeality [...is...] a dominant feature of masculinist knowledge" and that neither the feminine or the body itself are valorised as lived presences (Shildrick, 1994, p. 7). Crucial to this argument is the 'permission' it gives the feminist researcher to centralise the body. The importance of centralising the body in research is highlighted by Butler when she states that,

although the body in its struggle with precarity and persistence is at the heart of so many demonstrations, it is also the body that is on the line, exhibiting its value and its freedom in the

¹⁴ Throughout this thesis I will refer to the Sheela-na-Gig, the Virgin Mary, the bloody protestors and menstrual tweeters as 'role models'. By doing so I wish to suggest how these actors hold the potential to inspire menstruators to re-examine their menses and explore menstrual blood's powerful potential as an activist tool in the fight for menstrual rights, women's rights, gender equality or social justice. It is by inspiring menstruators and changing the images they have in their heads of what and how menstrual blood can be used, that change can happen.

demonstration itself, enacting, by the embodied form of the gathering, a claim to the political.
(Butler, 2015, p. 18)

Butler's connection of the vulnerability of the body with a 'claim to the political' is crucial to my examination of menstrual activism – understanding it as a combination of menstrual vulnerability and menstrual blood's political power. Furthermore, by combining the concept of *what can a body do* with the centring of the body itself, I hope to create a theoretical (and methodological) framework which can both address the complexities of what menstruating bodies can do within activist spaces and forefront menstrual blood as an activist tool. In doing so I hope that the menstruating/feminine body can be valorised not for what it hides (in the image of the Virgin Mary) but for all that it exposes, secretes, leaks and bleeds (in the image of the Sheela-na-Gigs).

3. *Vulnerability/Resistance*

In *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016) Butler explores the binary that has been created between vulnerability and resistance, particularly in spaces of protests. She challenges notions that resistance trumps vulnerability in moments of activism, and rejects the idea of the “political subject that establishes its agency by vanquishing its vulnerability” (*ibid*, p. 24), as “masculinist ideal[s] we surely ought to continue to oppose” (*ibid*, p. 24). Instead, Butler argues that vulnerability does not suddenly arise in the moment of resistance as something to be overcome, but instead emerges much earlier, before the organised resistance when the individual realises they need to resist (*ibid*, p. 12). Butler carves out a space where the relationality of bodies opens up the agential possibilities of vulnerability, and by not rejecting vulnerability as part of resistance – “I want to argue affirmatively that vulnerability, understood as deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as embodied enactment” (*ibid*, p. 22) – we can undo the binary oppositions created between vulnerability and resistance (*ibid*, p.25). Butler “consider[s] the undoing of this binary a feminist task” (*ibid*, p. 25).

Building on Butler's concept of vulnerability/resistance I will argue that menstrual blood has been used to silence and stigmatise menstruation and to label women as vulnerable, weak and in need of protection and that the activists in both my case studies mobilised these 'vulnerabilities' as a source of agency, activism and power.

4. Menstrual Activism

The final theoretical framework I will apply in my research is menstrual activism. I will work with Chris Bobel's text *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010) and Breanne Fahs' text *Out for Blood: Essays on Menstruation and Resistance* (2016), in order to situate my research within the work that has recently been carried out on menstrual activism.¹⁵ Bobel's research mostly centres on activists who aim to smash the myths, stigma, and shame around menstruation. Fahs' collection of essays aims to provoke new menstrual stories¹⁶ (Fahs, 2016, p. 10) – resistance to bloody taboos makes up a large part of these new stories. Both Bobel and Fahs examine menstrual activism and stories where the alleviation of menstrual taboos is central to the protests discussed. However, in both of my case studies the menstruators used their menses as a protesting *tool*, and their main aim was not menstrual rights but prison or abortion rights. As the researcher I have had to ask myself if my own interest in menstrual activism has made me 'see' menstrual activism where it is not. Therefore, a key question throughout this thesis will be: can these case studies be called menstrual activism if the primary aim is not to lift the stigma and shame surrounding periods?

I will combine these four theoretical frameworks with Hélène Cixous' essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1991). Cixous' writing on *écriture féminine* centres on the restrictions and repression of the feminine body and of feminine writing.¹⁷ She creates a new model for feminine expression and existence which departs from phallogocentric rationality and centres the body in academic discourse. She writes:

Because so few women have as yet won back their body. Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence', the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word 'impossible' and writes it as 'the end'. (Cixous, 1991, p. 886)

¹⁵ Some of the writing and research I use about menstrual activism and menstrual health comes from blogs and websites. This reflects the nature of the menstrual health/activism field which is not fully formed as an academic field yet. Currently the field of 'critical menstrual studies' is being established with *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstrual Studies* currently being compiled, as well as organisations such as the Menstrual Health Hub which are endeavouring to centralise all of the disparate research conducted on menstruation.

¹⁶ Instead of exploring 'new menstrual stories' I will discuss 'new menstrual role models' in chapter three.

¹⁷ The difference between the 'feminine' and 'female' must be acknowledged here. I understand Cixous' use of the term 'feminine' as a way of understanding all that has been described as 'other' to masculine culture. This difference to the 'norm' can also be applied to the menstruators body. It is in this way that I use the 'feminine', and Cixous' writing, to understand these questions about menstrual activism.

It is by centring the menstruating body that this thesis will explore how the bloody protestors and menstrual tweeters used their menses to break through their blood-reviling societies. In particular, it is the way that they wrote about their menstrual blood which I will explore with Cixous' work.

SECTION III – METHODOLOGY

1. Methods

In order to conduct this research I will use a mixed method approach: a literature review, archival research, media analysis and content analysis of tweets. I have selected these methods to draw attention to the voices and experiences of the menstrual activists in both protests. Lykke argues that a mixed method approach is preferable because it can lead to research which is open ended and experimental, she writes:

the innovative force of Feminist Studies will only operate in optimal ways if it maintains an experimental, unorthodox and open approach to the issue of methods. Feminist innovation emerges out of untraditional, non-authoritarian and, to use Haraway's term, 'unfaithful' (1991b, 151) approaches to existing theories, thinking technologies and tools. (Lykke, 2010, p. 161)

This mixed method approach also reflects the multi-layered theoretical framework, and I hope that pairing the two will highlight the complexities of what a menstruating body can do. As Fahs writes "the study of the body is necessarily messy" (2016, p. 11) – all the more so when it is a bleeding, resisting body.

To examine the bloody protest I conducted a literature review and archival research. I began by carrying out an in-depth review of the existing work written about the bloody protest, including work from Aretxaga (1995), McAuliffe and Hale (2010), McWilliams (1993), Neti (2003), O'Keefe (2006), and Weinstein (2006). I used this literature review to source archival material. From here I searched three main Irish archives¹⁸ for diary entries, letters and statements written by the bloody protestors or by family and friends. However, despite their being a wealth of information digitally available about the dirty protests in Long Kesh, there was a void when it came to the protests at Armagh Goal. This lack of archival resources on this historical event supports McAuliffe and Hale's (2010) claim that historical research on the dirty protests has long focused

¹⁸ The National Library of Ireland, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and the National Archives in Dublin.

exclusively on the men's protest. I will further explore this claim in chapter two. The main part of my archival material, therefore, came from the pages of the Irish Times (one of Ireland's main newspapers), where in 1980 a series of articles and letters were exchanged between journalists and the protestors. I paired the material from the Irish Times with a report by the organisation Women Against Imperialism (1980) which featured letters, interviews and reports from the bloody protestors and others who visited Armagh Goal.

I approached the menstrual themed tweets by carrying out a media analysis of 186 tweets.¹⁹ On the 7th May 2017 I carried out a search for tweets which were sent to the taoiseach, Enda Kenny, and which included the hashtag #Repealthe8th and one of the following words: menstruation, period, blood or bloody. This search returned tweets from November 2015 to January 2016, and one tweet dating back to December 2014. After analysing the body of tweets, I then coded the tweets into the following categories: puns/humour; gory details; questions for the taoiseach; political demands; and experiences other than menstruation.

2. Methodological Framework

The Body

One of the central aims of this research is to move the menstruating body to the centre of analysis. I therefore turned to Elizabeth Grosz's work to explore how *corporeal feminism* could guide me. Grosz argues that bodies are "inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them [and] are the products [...] of the very social constitution of nature itself" (Grosz, 1996, p. x). Our discussion of the body need to be radically reconfigured if "we are to understand how cultural, social and historical forces work to transform it" (Blackman, 2008, p. 77). In this research I attempt to radically reconfigure the menstruating body in order to redefine its difference not as "beneign diversity" but as "difference as disruption" (Murdolo, 1996, p. 69 in Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p. 110).²⁰ In the case of the bloody protest the 'difference of menstruation' created disruptions in the republican movement (and as I will argue in chapter two in Catholic and

¹⁹ University College Dublin is currently conducting research on approximately 300,000 tweets from 2016 which contained the hashtag #Repealthe8th, however its findings have not yet been published. This research will include some of these tweets that I am examining.

²⁰ While Murdolo uses the term 'difference as disruption' to understand the suppression of difference between women, I adopt this term and use it slightly differently to understand the difference that menstruation can play on society and activism movements.

feminist communities), and the bloody tweets acted as a disruptive difference to typical online activism.

I match this centralising of the menstruator's body with a sexual difference theory approach to the body as "not a static unitary essence, but a dynamic, multiple, non-hierarchical and differentiating process; and it is this bodily process that [...] makes up an important methodological hub" (Lykke, 2010, p. 150). Using this method I approach menstruators bodies (in both the bloody protest and menstrual themed tweets) as active and powerful, and containing multiple meanings, ideas, and possibilities. Combining these approaches – centring the body, understanding difference as disruption, and the body as an agential and layered actor – allows me to explore the question of how and why these two case studies are examples of menstrual activism with an in-depth understanding of what role the menstruating body plays in menstrual activism.

Furthermore, I will approach the material used in this research, especially the menstrual tweets, with the aim of uncovering the re-insertion of the body into texts. Traditionally content analysis understands texts as static and non-interactive (Leavy, 2007, p. 227). However, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis the menstrual themed tweets allow for the viscosity of the menstruating body to be more than "pre-existing and non-interactive". By examining how the body can be re-inserted into texts I will uncover how texts can become "sources of resistance, including feminist resistance" (*ibid*, p. 230) – this will be particularly discussed in chapter three alongside Cixous. I will explore how the self-exposure of the bloody protestors' letter in the Irish Times and the menstrual themed tweets are both examples of how the menstruating body can be re-inserted into texts as a form of resistance

Diffraction

I now turn to Donna Haraway's *thinking technology of diffraction*:

Diffraction is the production of difference patterns in the world, not just of the same reflected – displaced – elsewhere (Haraway, 1997, p. 268 in Lykke, 2010, p. 155).

Throughout this paper I will endeavour to employ diffraction in a few different ways. First, I will use the process of diffraction rather than self-reflexivity when conducting this research in order to look beyond my own interaction with the material and to instead explore the patterns and possibilities this material gives me (Lykke, 2010, p. 155). In doing this I highlight that I "not only

want to think about the world in a critical mode, but ... also want to change it” (*ibid*, p. 154). Instead of simply reflecting on my involvement with the Irish abortion rights movement and menstrual activism, or on my nonaligned opinions about the Northern Irish conflict, the tool of diffraction has allowed me to find new *interference patterns*.

I also wish to employ diffraction when conceptualising the relationship between the female protests at the Armagh Gaol and the male protests at the H-Block. While critics claimed the women merely copied or followed orders from the H-Block, I will argue that rather than simply reflecting the H-Block protest, the women’s bloody protest was a process of diffraction where the foreground and the background shifted (*ibid*, p. 155). The protests were transformed, rather than merely repeated, when enacted by menstruating bodies. I visualise the bloody protest diffracting itself through the *spy holes* of the Armagh Gaol, just as the optical phenomenon diffraction “occurs when light waves are sent through an array of narrow slits” (*ibid*, p. 154).

Diffraction will be used throughout this thesis not only as a methodological framework, but also as a theoretical tool, while the other methodological approaches – centring the body, sexual difference and texts as resistance – will be employed alongside my theoretical frameworks.

CHAPTER TWO

BLOOD ON THE WALLS

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER TWO

This chapter will begin with a historical and contemporary contextualisation of the bloody protest in Armagh Jail, before examining the bloody protest with three main questions in mind: Is the bloody protest a case of menstrual activism? How does the concept of vulnerability/resistance expand our understanding of the bloody protest? What does the bloody protest tell us about what the menstruating body can do, rather than what is done to the menstruating body?

Margaretta D’Arcy is a feminist activist²¹ who took part in the bloody protest for eight weeks in May 1980.²² This poem and song is believed to be written by her (Moore, 2000):

And there they remain, those *warrior women*,
Locked up in filth you could not believe.
They hold Scott and his warders powerless.
They hold them there, they’ll never concede.
Women of Ireland, stand up and declare.
Women of Ireland, understand your power.
Make us see that together we’ll do it
We’ll tumble down their stone grey tower.

In Black Armagh of the *Goddess Macha*,
Last February in a cold grey cell...

(D’Arcy, in Moore, 2000, italics added)²³

The song encapsulates some of the main themes which will be discussed in this chapter; themes of visibility (stand up and declare), of power (understand your power), of new role models (those warrior women, Goddess Macha²⁴), and of the resilience of activism (We’ll tumble down).

²¹ D’Arcy has taken part in campaigns ranging from the Armagh Jail protests to the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Campaign in the 1980’s, to the recent high profile campaign against the use of Shannon airport by the US military. Her contemporary performance activism is explored in a tribute in the Contemporary Theatre Review. (Hughes and Parry, 2015)

²² D’Arcy was imprisoned for refusing to pay a fine for protesting outside Armagh Jail on International Women’s Day 1980. She joined the political protestors for eight weeks, notably as a feminist rather than as a republican activist. (IMELDA, 2015)

²³ Full poem in Appendix 1.

²⁴ “In Irish mythology, Macha is a goddess linked with horses, battle, and sovereignty. She is said to have collected the heads of the slain, which were known as “Macha’s acorn crop”. Though possibly a triple goddess herself, she is often seen as one aspect of the Irish triple goddess of battle and sovereignty, the Morrigan.” (Moore, 2014)

Throughout the following two chapters I will explore the possibility of creating different stories about the menstruating body, this poem begins this exploration.

SECTION I – HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY VISIBILITY

Both O’Keefe (2006) and McAuliffe and Hale (2010) discuss how historical narratives cover the dirty protests of the men at length, and the prison protests at Long Kesh in general, while leaving menstrual blood to be “obscured in the history of the Troubles” (O’Keefe, 2006, p. 551). McAuliffe and Hale discuss how the women protestors were just as engaged and committed to the struggle and yet “women have remained in the margins and borders of the Irish nationalist historical narrative, their reasons for activism often hidden behind the narrative of conflict between the state and the (male) citizen” (McAuliffe and Hale, 2010, p. 171). For McAuliffe and Hale history has been measured in ‘male centred’ terms and in doing so we have asked questions which have ‘missed’ women’s experiences and activities. McAuliffe and Hale argue for carrying out a women-centred inquiry, one which explores the “existence of a female culture within the general culture shared by men and women” (*ibid*, p. 180).

In my study of the bloody protest I hope to further examine the links between the bloody protest and menstrual activism. 2015 was called the year the period went public (Bobel, 2015), the year when menstruation moved from the margins towards the centre of popular culture.²⁵ This research fits into this trajectory of moving the menstruating body to the centre while exploring its potential for difference to act as disruption. It is also significant that I, as the researcher, am a product of this recent surge of interest in menstrual activism, which has accompanied me through my development as both researcher and feminist. As Bobel (2008, p. 739) writes, “histories not only document and analyse events but additionally carry the potential to reenergize contemporary

²⁵ Since 2015 menstrual activism has been in the spotlight. Academic attention to the topic has grown, within the Gender Studies department at Utrecht University two MA thesis’ explored menstruation last year: Freyja Jónudóttir Barkardóttir (2016) and Dresda Emma Méndez de la Brena (2016), and (as previously mentioned) the field of ‘critical menstrual studies’ is being established with *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstrual Studies* currently being compiled. Menstrual activism has also increasingly popped up on our social media screens in the past two years, whether it is Kiran Gandhi running the London Marathon while free-bleeding (McGraa, 2015), Rupri Kaur’s bloodied sheets being removed from Instagram (Tsjeng, 2015) or an exhibition dedicated to periods (Cannon, 2017).

activists everywhere”. I hope that by uncovering more about the history of how menstrual blood and vulnerability have been used as powerful tools of protection and activism, future activists might continue to reclaim and reuse these tools.

SECTION II – BLOODY PROTEST AS MENSTRUAL ACTIVISM

1. Menstrual Activism – A Definition

Menstrual activism works towards the improvement of the experience of menstruation, including the alleviation of menstrual stigma, improving menstrual products, expanding definitions of who menstruates and who doesn't, and eradicating menstrual 'humour'. It has been defined in a number of ways: as a fight for more education, discussion and openness about menstruation (Fahs, 2016, p. 96), and as a rebellion against the “culture of secrecy and shame around menstruation” (*ibid*, p. 104). Chris Bobel defines menstrual activism as a rejection of “the construction of menstruation as a problem in need of a solution” (Bobel, 2010, p. 7). Drawing on these multiple definitions for a movement which crosses so many different types of people,²⁶ I define menstrual activism as the reclamation of the menstruating body and a refusal to hide menses and the menstrual cycle.

The following discussion of the bloody protest will demonstrate that the protest in Armagh Goal wasn't (solely) directed at smashing menstrual taboos. This protest used the tool of menstruation to protest another cause: prisoner's rights. Therefore, the central goal of this protest was not to reclaim the menstruating body and make visible the menstrual cycle, instead menstrual blood was used as a means to an end. However, as this discussion will discover, in our blood reviling society²⁷ menstruation cannot be used simply as a tool, without the activism itself also becoming *menstrual activism*. It was not possible for these events *not to become* menstrual activism. The fundamentally disruptive character of menstruation in our society 'interfered' with the very nature of this activism.

²⁶ In *New Blood* (2010) Chris Bobel explores the differences between radical menstrual activists and feminist spiritual menstrual activists, whilst also paying homage to the “communal consideration of menstruation from women, men, trans folks, environmentalists, genderqueers, academics, activists, feminists, scientists, artists, zine writers, punks and rebels” (Bobel paraphrased in Fahs, 2016, p. 114-115). In my own experience organising an event for Menstrual Hygiene Day 2017 in Utrecht I was struck by the diversity of approaches on the subject. This is a field that attracts many different people and perspectives, creating a truly diverse and multi-layered understanding of menstruation.

²⁷ In an interview with Chris Bobel she described contemporary society as “a blood hating, blood reviling culture” (Bobel, 2017).

This ‘interference’ can be understood using Haraway’s concept of *diffraction*. As Haraway writes, “diffraction does not produce ‘the same’ displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference” (Haraway, 2004, p. 70). Menstrual blood meant that the protestors could not simply carry out the same protest as the men, instead it created an interference which created a fundamentally different protest, adopting the meanings of the tools they used.

2. *The Power of Menstrual Blood and Anasyrma*

The taboos surrounding menstruation are what make any use of menstrual blood as a tool disruptive to the original nature of the protest. This thesis examines the disruptive power of menstrual blood. This potential power of menstrual blood was revealed to the protestors in a series of events. Before the bloody protest, the prisoners’ Catholic upbringings and role models such as the Virgin Mary would have instilled them with the importance of modesty, secrecy, and shame²⁸ (De Troyer, 2003). Later, the denial and rationing of sanitary pads by prison guards and police officers demonstrated how, given this upbringing, menstruation could be used as punishment.²⁹ During and after the bloody protest, journalists’ reports – feminist and not – often downplayed the importance of the blood in the protest. In one article their menstrual blood was compared to the blood of the victims of the IRA, thereby neutralising its taboo power and reincorporating it into the ‘safe’ dialogue of (male) political violence, and illustrating how their menstrual blood could be silenced and contorted.³⁰ Meanwhile the republican movement³¹ reminded them of their

²⁸ As the political prisoner Brenda Murphy (author of ‘A Curse’) explains:

In Ireland you don’t speak about your period. You don’t even mention the word. My mother hardly ever mentioned it to us and we were a family of eight girls and one boy. You get your period, but you just don’t talk about it. It’s taboo. (O’Keefe, 2006, p. 538)

²⁹ In the Woman Against Imperialism report (1980) accounts were given of how the British authorities (police officers and prison guards) used menstruation as a punishment. In the account by a thirteen year old girl, she describes the experience of her home being raided and getting her period in the moment of the raid, to which the police woman said “[I]et it f---- run down your legs, you are not getting up to get a sanitary towel” (*ibid*, p. 8). A further report of the health and sanitary facilities in the Armagh Goal described how the “supply of sanitary towels which the girls receive varies according to the whim of the screws”, and how the women had to wait to be given their ration supplied on a particular date of the month. It further described the irregularity of supplies, some months the women would get 2 packets of towels, some months 2 sanitary pads a day. (*ibid*, p. 20)

³⁰ In the series of critiques and responses (printed in the Irish Times on September 5th 1980) to Nell McCafferty’s article the issue of the protestors menstrual blood as part of the protest was hardly touched upon. In the few responses which did discuss menstrual blood de Burca (1980) criticised McCafferty for her focus on the menstrual blood as a particularly female gesture and O’Leary (1980) compared their menstrual blood on the walls of the prison to the blood shed of victims of the IRA. The power and activism of their menstrual blood was widely played down in these responses.

³¹ The republican movement tried to discourage the women in Armagh jail from joining the protest, Aretxaga discusses this with a protesting prisoner whos brother was horrified at her joining the protest:

... They didn’t want us on dirt protest because of our periods. They didn’t say that; they said that we were women, that we were different. But we knew it was because of our periods. These were men who

‘duty’ to be ‘traditional republican women’ (Weinstein, 2006, p. 21) and to keep their silence on the subject. The attempt of these external actors to repress the menstruating body, demonstrates the innate power that menstruation holds. The relationship between power and resistance is explored by Michel Foucault when he writes that it is not “possible for power relations to exist without points of insubordination”; he calls these points “means of escape” (Foucault, 1983, p. 225). Foucault understands the relationship between power and resistance as one with “a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal” (Foucault, 1983, p. 226). Power cannot exist without the possibility for resistance, and the power of menstrual blood is by the taboos and restrictions that surround it. Only something so powerful would need so many restrictions and regulations to keep it in check. These made visible to the protestors the potential for resistance in their menstrual blood.

As can be seen, menstrual blood was ‘powerfully’ used against the protestors in multiple ways. However, another example of the power of menstrual blood which menstruators themselves hold is *anasyrma*. *Anasyrma* is the act of women lifting their skirts suddenly and exposing their genitals, “a gesture of revelation that is unexpected and startling” (Suter, 2015, p. 21). It is best known from Ancient Greek stories, but variants are seen in the image of Medusa and the Sheela-na-Gig. Ann Suter argues that it is the forbidden aspect of this gesture which gives *anasyrma* its power (*ibid*, p. 21).³² She also argues that *anasyrmas* protective effects are gendered: when performed before women it symbolises health and fertility, while before men it protects against military attack or natural disasters (*ibid*, p. 33). History and mythology suggest that *anasyrma* is especially effective when performed by a menstruating woman: the exposure of women’s bleeding vulvas has been said to scare away hailstorms, whirlwinds and lightning (Ellis, 1894, p. 262). Together menstrual blood and the exposed vulva create a force powerful enough to ward off evil. *Anasyrma* illustrates the long history of the potential of menstrual blood as a productive, threatening, active and present force (Fahs, 2016, p. 35).

had killed, and had been imprisoned and they couldn’t say the word ‘period’. (McAuliffe and Hale, 2010, p. 182)

³² Suter also argues that *anasyrmas* protective effects are gendered: when performed before women it symbolises health and fertility, while before men it protects against military attack or natural disasters (Suter, 2015, p. 33).

While the bloody protestors in Armagh Goal had been exposed to menstrual narratives full of taboos, silencing³³ and shame, these experiences – of their Catholic upbringing, of the prison and police officers, of journalists and of the republican movement – created the potential for them to discover the displaced power of their menstrual blood. Above I illustrated how menstrual blood can be recognised both negatively (paragraph one: their experiences) and positively (paragraph two: anasyrma), this illustrates how the protestors began to shift their understanding of menstrual blood from something shameful and hidden, to the celebratory exposure of the anasyrma (this transitional period will be further explored in ‘Exposure’ on page 30). In carrying out the bloody protest they recaptured the power of the Sheela-na-Gig and anasyrma and brought these myths to life in a dark grey prison in Armagh.

3. Reception and Criticism of the Bloody Protest, and the Voices of the Protestors

Now that the definitions and possibilities of menstrual activism have been laid out, I turn to how the bloody protest in Armagh was received, as well as the words of the protestors themselves and how they understood their own protest and, importantly, their responses to critics.

Marking Bleeding Bodies

Journalist Tim Coogan’s description of visiting the bloody protestors³⁴ highlights how sickened and appalled he was by ‘clots of blood’ and the ‘detritus of menstruation’ he saw in their cells (Aretxaga, 1995, p. 137). He wrote that “the dirty protest is bad enough to contemplate when men are on it, but it becomes even worse when embarked upon by women” (Irish Times, 1980). As Aretxaga points out, “what can make 30 dirty women more revolting than 400 dirty men if not the exposure to menstrual blood” (Aretxaga, 1995, p. 138)? Coogan’s response exemplifies how the presence of menstrual blood disrupted the general narrative of the dirty protests: menstruating women were too revolting to be part of this protest of faeces and urine. O’Keefe (2006), McAuliffe and Hale (2010) and Aretxaga (1995) all highlight how the ‘female curse’ denied these women political neutrality – the citizen/activist body which is by default male, lacking leakiness – and marked their bleeding bodies as different, as ‘unspeakable’. Society accepted and supported the

³³ Fahs argues that this “need to silence menstruating women [...] relates to this threat of associating blood and power” (Fahs, 2016, p. 35).

³⁴ While Tim Coogan’s account of the bloody protest was one of many accounts and responses, his account did deal directly with the menstruation, which many of the other skirted around.

filthy, generic freedom fighter (i.e. the (male)citizen), but was unable to accept the filthy, *bleeding* freedom fighter.³⁵

Menstrual blood as a marker of sexual difference³⁶ holds the possibility for new forms of transgression. As Aretxaga explains,

While the men's Dirty Protest was locked in its own violence, the women's provoked a *movement of social transformation*. The impulse of such transformation came from the articulation of menstrual blood as a symbol of sexual difference with ongoing feminist discourse. (Aretxaga, 1995, p. 137, italics added)

Menses became more than a marker of sexual difference, instead this difference became disruptive, within the republican movement, Catholic society, and the feminist movement of the day. By making period blood public, these blood protestors disrupted the norms of the republican movement where women were only allowed if they fully imitated men, and they further challenged the norms of Catholic society which felt women should not be in prison, let alone smearing their menses on the walls of their cells. And lastly, they disrupted the feminist movement of the day by demanding solidarity across Protestant/Catholic sectarian lines. In chapter three I will further examine the power of the feminine to disrupt (Cixous, 1991) and explore how Haraway's concept of diffraction can help to understand how difference can work as disruption.

Coogan's horror at the menstrual blood he saw in the Armagh Goal also reveals the latent power in menstrual bloods' ability to disgust, and how this disgust itself became an agent for visibility. It was, ironically, Coogan's very recoiling from the bloody protest which helped to publicise it and mark the protest as separate from that at Long Kesh. As McAuliffe and Hale (2010, p. 181) explain it was Coogan's book³⁷ chapter dedicated to the Armagh women that put the bloody protest on the map, not the feminist articles and responses which I will now turn to examine.

³⁵ As Brah notes in her discussion of how menstrual activism should challenge the moral panics of menstruation, "it is a particular kind of body – gendered as *female* and *bloody* – that carries the weight of moral panics" (Brah, 2016, p. 104).

³⁶ In a discussion of Irigaray's work on sexual difference, Lykke describes it as "a historically constructed difference and inequality between individuals with female and male morphology" and discusses how Irigaray argues that challenging this inequality can be achieved "by insisting on and making visible female difference" (Lykke, 2010, p. 109). It is this understanding of sexual difference which I utilise when unravelling the ideas of menses as more than a marker of sexual difference.

³⁷ *On the Blanket: The H-Block Story*, 1980.

Feminism and the Bloody Protest

At the time of the bloody protest there was much debate on the pages of the Irish Times as to whether this protest was feminist or not, and whether all feminists should support the cause.³⁸ Instead of addressing the question of whether the bloody protest was feminist, I want to examine how and why it was different to the male protest and how this difference transformed it into menstrual activism. While the term ‘menstrual activism’ might not have been used in the media at the time, I am reading the use of the term feminism as a reference to the menstrual aspect of the protest. As can be seen in this critique of Nell McCafferty, the menstrual blood was central to the question of whether it was a feminist protest: “[McCafferty considers] the strike a feminist issue for reasons which are not too clear except perhaps that she sees the smearing of menstrual blood on the walls of their prison cells as a peculiarly female gesture. Certainly it is something that male prisoners cannot do” (De Burca, 1980).

Aretxaga argues that the bloody protestors viewed their protest as not that different to the dirty protests of the men in Long Kesh. She claims they saw it as the same struggle for the same political gains (Aretxaga, p. 138). However, while the bloody protest might have begun with the intention of replicating the dirty protests at Long Kesh,³⁹ the protestors also defended their actions as distinctly feminist. In their letter to the Irish Times the protestors argued in support of McCafferty’s claim that theirs was a feminist issue,⁴⁰

[i]t is a feminist issue when the network of this jail is completely geared to male domination. The governor, the assistant governor, and the doctor are all males. We are subject to physical and verbal abuse from male screws who patrol our wing daily, continually peeping into our cells. (No-Wash Protestors, 1980)

³⁸ The question was raised by McCafferty in her Irish Times article when she argued that the bloody protest was a feminist issue that demanded feminist support “[s]ince the suffering women anywhere, whether self-inflicted or not, cannot be ignored by feminists, then we have a clear responsibility to respond”. (McCafferty, 1980)

³⁹ As Aretxaga argues rather than a replication of the dirty protest at Long Kesh, the bloody protest was more of a ‘mimetic enactment’,

mimetically reappropriating the Dirty Protest, the Armagh at first negated gender difference, stating that their struggle the same as that of the men. Yet this attempt to transcend genderized context by negating the feminine was negated by the objectification of sexual difference that the menstrual represented. Thus, the mimetic appropriation of the Dirty entailed a process of rewriting a (hi) story of resistance, a rewriting that specified the feminine in its most transgressive form. (Aretxaga, 1995, p. 142)

⁴⁰ McCafferty’s argument for why the protest is a feminist issue:

It is my belief that Armagh is a feminist issue that demands our support. I believe that the 32 women there have been denied one of the fundamental rights of women, the right to bodily integrity, and I suggest that an objective examination of the events that gave rise to the dirt strike will support this contention. (McCafferty, 1980)

Their defence of the protest as feminist focuses on the male domination of Armagh Goal. This jars with Coogan's, and others', accounts of the bloody protest, where the femininity of the menstrual blood is focused on without any attention paid to the male dominated environment of Armagh Goal in which the protest took place. The bloody protest was not feminist simply because of the use of menstrual blood, but also because it took place against the backdrop of a male dominated space.

If diffraction is about shifting the view of backgrounds and foregrounds then the words of the protestors can be understood as describing the process of diffraction. According to Haraway, this shifting of backgrounds and foregrounds creates alternate patterns based on the "history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference" (Haraway, 1997, p. 273). By making visible the male domination of the prison space, the protestors incorporate their experiences of strip searches, regulation of sanitary products and menstrual stigmatisation (which all happened prior to, during and after the bloody protest) into their understanding of the bloody protest as feminist. Diffraction shifts our understanding by moving the male domination of Armagh prison forward and placing it as an integral part of why and how the protest occurred. The bloody protestors were not simply carrying out the same protest as their male comrades, they were also protesting the treatment of menstruating bodies in prison and the sexual (and gendered) harassment they experienced. They were using the tool of menstrual blood in a protest which, by placing itself against the male dominated prison space, became more than a republican protest, it shifted – diffracted – to include the treatment of menstruating bodies in prison.

Exposure

Sheela-na-Gigs (and the act of anasyrma) part their vulva in a move of protection, power and visibility (see *Image 3* for details). The protestors performed a similar act when they ask their critics and supporters:

Is being forced to [publically] remove a saturated sanitary towel, so that the screws can satisfy themselves that you have nothing lurking between your legs, decent and humane? (No-Wash Protestors, 1980)



Image 3: Sheela-na-Gig

This question suggests that they think publically removing sanitary towels is something indecent and to be hidden. However, the very act of writing about this in the Irish Times is a radical gesture of exposure, eclipsing their Catholic upbringing's desire to shamefully hide and remain silent about this experience. This question illustrates the transition the protestors are undergoing, from thinking of menstruation under the role model of the Virgin Mary – shamefully – to thinking of it under the role model of the Sheela-na-Gigs – where the exposure of their menstruating vulvas is a powerful force. In the same article the protestors state:

Nell McCafferty apparently said in the article: 'The menstrual blood on the walls of Armagh Prison smells to high heaven.' Yes, it most certainly does. (No-Wash Protestors, 1980)

This graphic description of their blood on the walls has none of the shame that can be read into their question about removing the sanitary towel. They seem to be almost revelling in the 'disgust' of their situation, exposing the visceral realities of the protest to all. Here they appear to have fully embraced the model of the Sheela-na-Gig.

4. To Bleed Publically

Even if the protestors stated intention was to carry out the protest 'just like the men', as we have seen above, the disruptive power of menstrual blood transformed their protest. When they brought menstrual blood into the public domain and discourse this protest became menstrual activism, it became a reclamation of the bleeding body.

In the short story 'A Curse' Brenda Murphy, a former political prisoner, tells the story of a woman getting her period while being held for questioning in a prison cell:

'Can I speak to a policewoman?'

'No.' After a pause, 'There's none here at the minute. Now what is it?' He eyed her impatiently. 'I've taken my period,' she said simply. 'I need some sanitary towels and a wash. I've not been allowed to wash since I was arrested, days ago.'

He looked at her with disgust. 'Have you no shame? I've been married twenty years and my wife wouldn't mention things like that.'

What is the colour of shame? All she could see was red as it trickled down her leg.

(Murphy, 1985, p. 40)

The story is filled with moments of shame and disgust, of periods as an inconvenience – “[a] curse it was for her right now” (*ibid*, p. 40) – and of the degrading treatment menstruators receive in prison. However, Murphy’s story highlights the inhumanity of the prison guards and the difficulties of bleeding in prison, and transforms this moment of shame into a moment of resistance. Murphy creates a new story about the menstruating body, a story where, though the body might be treated with disgust, the menstruator refuses to keep their body invisible, a story where they “stand up and declare” (D’Arcy, in Moore, 2000). Murphy makes visible the experiences of menstruators in a system that reviles them.

We can see, in Murphy’s story and the protestors accounts, that these activists refused to hide their menstrual blood and reclaimed their menstruating bodies as bodies of power, agency and activism. Vivid descriptions of the reality of bleeding in prison spread across the pages of Ireland’s national newspapers; people on both sides of the political conflict were reading about *women’s blood*. The protestors reshaped their understanding of menstrual blood as a productive, threatening, active and present force. They reconnected menstrual blood and power in their favour, by making visible that which should be hidden. It is this act of bleeding on the pages of newspapers that connects the bloody protests with the menstrual themed tweets 35 years later, filling twitter with details of menstrual cycles and spreading the message of Ireland’s continued oppression of women. Both protests illustrate the transformative power of menstrual blood when it is made public.

SECTION III – VULNERABILITY AND RESISTANCE

1. Judith Butler and Vulnerability/Resistance

In Judith Butler’s discussion of the binary relationship between vulnerability and resistance she describes vulnerability as a sense of exposure due to precarity (Butler, 2016, p. 14), while also a deliberate exposure to power (*ibid*, p. 22). Butler presents vulnerability as both a possibility of being ‘acted on’ and a powerful action in itself (*ibid*, p. 23). Vulnerability acting on the body whilst also being mobilised, rather than overcome, creates a dynamic which requires melting these seemingly binary opposites together (*ibid*, p. 14). Vulnerability no longer simply happens *to people*,

it can also be mobilised as a tool of resistance against the very structures which create the situation of precarity. Through this mobilisation we begin to undo the binary which Butler is challenging, we begin to “dismantl[e] the resistance to vulnerability in order precisely to resist” (*ibid*, p. 27). Butler’s understanding of vulnerability as “a constituent feature of a human animal both affected and acting” (*ibid*, p. 26) leads her to look at practices of nonviolent resistance which deliberately expose bodies to the police or military. In these instances, she argues, bodily vulnerability can be understood as “something that is actually marshalled or mobilized for the purposes of resistance” (*ibid*, p. 26). In these moments where activist bodies are “living blockades or barriers” they are both *acted on* by state violence, and *enacting resistance* (*ibid*, p. 26). As I examine the bloody protest using this conceptualisation of vulnerability/resistance, the key point I will bear in mind is the possibility to mobilise vulnerability that has been acted on the body into a tool of resistance against those (so-called) powerful actors. As Hélène Cixous writes, “[a]nd with such force in their fragility; a fragility, a vulnerability, equal to their incomparable intensity” (1991, p. 886).

2. *The Virgin Mary with Red Paint on her Crotch*

In O’Keefe’s discussion of the raids and searches carried out on republican women, she argues that the British Army used menstrual blood as a tool of degradation. In one incident with British soldiers a woman describes how soldiers stood “outside her home shouting repeatedly ‘Come out, you whore’, [and] left a statue of the Virgin Mary in her garden, defaced with red paint on the crotch” (Fairweather et al., 1984 quoted in O’Keefe, 2006, p. 540). The merest suggestion of menstrual blood is enough to defile and disgrace the Virgin Mary. This incident illustrates the oppressors use of menstrual stigma and shame as a tool to *act on* Catholic women. The Virgin Mary was – and still is – promoted as the ideal Irish woman: “pure, virtuous, and ceaselessly adoring of her son” (Weinstein, 2006, p. 31), and by extension, the sons of Ireland. Values of chastity, purity, passiveness, and mothering were instilled in Catholic women and girls (McWilliams, 1993, p. 83). These idolised images of the woman-who-does-not-bleed are far removed from that of the Sheela-na-Gig parting her vulva in powerful protection⁴¹ – instead of

⁴¹ The Sheela-na-Gigs focused the viewer/worshippers attention on the body part – the vulva – which the Virgin Mary was denied. In this way Sheela-na-Gigs explicitly mobilise the vulnerable – the vulva – as a force of power and activism, and this was translated by audiences who considered Sheela-na-Gigs symbols of fertility or protection against evil. It is worth highlighting that their vulvas were protection *against evil*, not as evil temptation itself, i.e. “they suffer the curse of Eve” (McAuliffe and Hale, 2010, p. 181)

(powerfully) acting, the Virgin Mary is acted upon. The Catholic church hide menstruators blood – in shame – and the British expose menstruators blood – to shame.

However, wherever the body is acted on there exists the possibility of mobilising this vulnerability as a form of resistance – as Foucault would say, where there is power there is the potential for struggle and resistance. While the reverence of the Virgin Mary repressed and shamed menstruators, it was also the protective role of the Virgin Mary *as the mother* that might have initially mobilised these women. McAuliffe and Hale argue that “[f]or many women their activism was an extension of their ‘traditional’ roles as wives and mothers – they organised to protest the conditions under which their sons, brothers, fathers and husbands were held” (McAuliffe and Hale, 2010, p. 172). This is not to suggest that the women only carried out the bloody protests *for their men* but instead to explain how the image of Mary might have supported their mobilisation. The mobilisation of this protective role into political activism may have shown the protestors how ‘passive’ vulnerability could be transformed into active resistance in general. This mobilisation through the image of the (bloody) Virgin Mary represents the transformative change these protestors were undergoing, locating them somewhere in-between the image of the Virgin Mary (who is always *acted on*) and the power of the Sheela-na-Gigs (an agential actor). By becoming active as mothers and protectors, the path was paved to become active as menstruators and protestors.

3. *Vulnerability – Exposure and Protection*

To be vulnerable is to be exposed, and exposure requires protection. As the authors in *Vulnerability in Resistance* argue, vulnerability has been connected to two pervasive assumptions. One is that “vulnerability requires and implies the need for protection and the strengthening of paternalistic forms of power” (Butler et al., 2016, p. 1). These paternalistic forms of power construct the vulnerable as victims and/or without agency (*ibid*, p. 2). Menstruation has been constructed as something which women – in fact everyone – must be protected *from*. This can be seen in the long-lasting taboos that exist today around the globe⁴² and in Christian traditions that persist

⁴² Menstrual taboos exist around the world in different shapes and forms, in a photoessay for WaterAid young girls from Nepal were given cameras to document that which they cannot do when they are menstruating. The photos illustrated how menstrual taboos in Nepal forbid “eating with the family, staying in their own home, looking in the mirror, looking at the sun, touching fruit and flowers or even male relatives” (WaterAid, 2016).

today.⁴³ Menstruators are even protected *from themselves*, protected from touching their blood, smelling their blood, (and worst of all) leaking – think of tampon applicators, scented pads and tampons, and even of new designs such as Thinx underwear.⁴⁴ The worst thing a menstruator can do is be exposed, be vulnerable. Through menstrual etiquette,⁴⁵ menstrual shame and taboos, and the withholding of body literacy, menstrual exposure is constructed as something *which should not happen* and as something that menstruators (and everyone else) must be protected from.

Butler et al. also discuss how vulnerability is considered “the opposite of resistance and cannot be conceived as part of that practice” (Butler et al., 2016, p. 1). In order to understand how the prison protestors overcame this idea of vulnerability as inherently opposite to resistance I will now explore how the protestors subverted their menstrual blood into a force of protection, privacy, and power. In Mairead Farrell’s⁴⁶ letters she describes the heightened tension between prison guards and the protestors, and the protection the guards wore against the bloody protest: “[t]he female screws who work on the wings are supplied with special overalls, boots and gloves and masks. At the beginning the masks weren’t put to much use, but now it’s seldom one is seen without one” (Women Against Imperialism, 1980, p. 25). Farrell describes how the screws go off in the evening leaving only a night guard who doesn’t disturb them. The visibility of menstrual blood on the walls of their cells, its smell and its power to disgust, protect them from constant vigilance. One protestor describes their evening entertainment:

We have the rosary in Irish. One shouts it out the door and the rest responds, afterwards we have our Irish class, shouted out the doors [...] Then perhaps Bingo from our own made cards, it’s good crack [...] Then at 11.00 p.m. the ghost story is continued from the night before as most lie in their beds under the covers to keep warm as they listen to the story. At midnight all noise ceases – an order laid down by our own staff. (Women Against Imperialism, 1980, p. 15)

⁴³ In de Troyer’s chapter she discusses that while Christianity does not have any explicit restrictions on menstruating women taking part in church activities, there are rituals which are ‘traditionally’ carried out by older women and young girls, i.e. those who are not menstruating yet or anymore (De Troyer, 2003).

⁴⁴ While Thinx period underwear have been greatly praised, there are elements of them which still hold onto menstrual shame and stigmatisation. For example, their marketing focuses (in part) on how Thinx underwear can protect menstruators from leaks when using cups or tampons. While many menstruators want to be protected from leaking, menstrual activism also strives for a world where menstrual leaks are no longer shameful. Thinx underwear, both the black and beige models, have black inserts meaning that when you wear them you cannot see *how much* you bleed. These elements of Thinx’s marketing and design seemingly aim to hide menstruation.

⁴⁵ Menstrual etiquette is a concept which Sophie Laws uses in her book *Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation* (1990). This can be understood as “women may not draw men’s attention to menstruation in any way” (Stacey, 1990, xi)

⁴⁶ Mairead Farrell was a protesting prisoner who took part in the bloody protest, and alongside Mary Doyle and Mairead Nugent, took part in a hunger strike coinciding with the hunger strike carried out in Long Kesh. Her letters and accounts of the bloody protest were a huge resource for this research.

This image of cells covered in menstrual blood creating a protected space for the protestors to recite the rosary and tell ghost stories conjures images of pagan idols marking circles with menstrual blood, the colour red acting as a protective force, a magical charm (Walker, 1983, p. 639).⁴⁷ By “reclaim[ing] the ability to menstruate and us[ing] it against their captors” (O’Keefe, 2006, p. 536) the protestors carved out their own space within the masculine dominated prison. By using their menses to powerfully protect *themselves*, the protestors inverted the logic of paternalistic victimisation and mobilised menstrual vulnerability into a force of action and resistance for their republican cause.

4. Resistance in Red

This model of vulnerability/resistance shows us how menstruation has agency and resistance at its core and how this leads to menstrual activism. As O’Keefe writes this is a neglected field of study:

The use of menstruation, as both a hegemonic and counter-hegemonic tool, is grossly understudied. Despite developing a huge field of inquiry around the gendered body, feminist literature has not adequately addressed the politicization of menstruation. In fact, we know little about how women’s ability to menstruate is *directly* used against them, and in turn, how women have *directly* used menstruation in a subversive fashion to disrupt gender norms... To understand how menstruation is used as a means to control women is to also appreciate the potential significance of menstruation as a resistance tool. (O’Keefe, 2006, p. 536)

This lack of research into menstruation has left a void in our knowledge of forms of disruption. While bodily literacy⁴⁸ is usually described as the life skill of being connected to our menstrual cycles in order to support our “fully informed participation in health-care decision making” (Wershler, 2012), I want to expand this concept to include understanding menstruation’s political and patriarchal dimensions. Understanding the potential for activism at the centre of our monthly

⁴⁷ Walker described how just the colour of menstrual blood was considered a ‘potent charm’, “[a]ncient tombs everywhere have shown the bones of the dead covered with red ochre. Sometimes everything in the tomb, including the walls, had the red color” (Walker, 1983, p. 639)

⁴⁸ Wershler describes how she developed the concept of body literacy:

The concept of body literacy occurred to me after I read a novel illustrating the disempowering impact of illiteracy. The inability to read diminishes self esteem and opportunities to participate in the exchange of ideas. The connection to the lives of girls and women is obvious — the education of girls is a key strategy in all international development work. It struck me that most educated women in developed countries live with another kind of illiteracy — (we) are not taught to “read” or understand (our) own bodies. On the contrary, (we) are taught to distrust (our) bodies and accept various artificial means to “manage” them. By my definition, body literacy is acquired by learning to observe, chart and interpret our menstrual cycle events. This life skill (as I call it) helps us understand how our sexual, reproductive and general health and well-being are connected to our menstrual cycles. Body literacy supports, if not compels, our fully informed participation in health-care decision making. (Wershler, 2012)

cycles is a form of body literacy. In this way, we could view the bloody protest as a radical form of bodily re-education – discovering what a menstruating body can do as a political agent.

SECTION IV – POSSIBILITIES FOR A MENSTRUATING BODY

This chapter has so far discussed the potentiality of menstrual blood and how it was reclaimed by the bloody protestors. As O’Keefe points out, there is more research conducted on how women’s bodies are targeted and oppressed than on how women reclaim their bodies against oppression (O’Keefe, 2006, p. 551). In order to further explore how women/menstruators reclaim their bodies I will now turn to Butler’s discussion of Deleuze’s question: what can a body do?

As Butler notes in her discussion of Deleuze’s essay ‘What Can a Body Do?’, what is interesting about his question is the challenge it presents to traditional ways of thinking about the body and the way it reframes the body as a “set of capacities, instrumentalities or actions” (Butler and Taylor, 2010). What Deleuze also suggests, which Butler expands upon in her later work on vulnerability and resistance, is the way in which the “nature and limits of [the body’s] capacity to be affected” (Deleuze, 1990, p. 218), in other words its relationality, are in fact the source of its possibilities for resistance. With Deleuze’s question in mind, I examine menstrual activism and uncover the possibilities of what a body can do – despite and *because of* its potentiality to be acted on.

By exploring the possibilities of what a body can do, instead of what it *should do* – how it *should move* for example (Butler and Taylor, 2010) – the menstruating body is placed in web of ‘interference patterns’ (to borrow from Haraway’s concept of diffraction), incorporating the environment that surrounds and influences the body and the ideas and meanings bodies collect. In Lynn Randolph’s discussion of diffraction she hopes that by,

placing women’s reality into a SF world, a place composed of interference patterns, contemporary women might emerge as something other than the sacred image of the same, something *inappropriate*, deluded, *unfitting*, and *magical* – something that might make a difference. (Haraway, 1997, p. 273, italics added)

By asking what the body can do, different patterns – diffracted patterns – appear. By asking this question of the menstruating body, I hope it can “emerge as something other than the sacred image of the same”.

What happens when the menstruating body cannot do what it usually does: hide? During the bloody protest the shame, vulgarity and disgust surrounding the menstruating body remained (as is discussed in *To Bleed Publically*, page 31, above), but the possibility of keeping menstruation hidden disappeared. The prison environment forced the women to reveal their menstruation: before the protest, when prisoners were required to provide prison officers of details of their menstrual cycle because they could only receive menstrual products at the ‘regular’ time of the month⁴⁹ (Women Against Imperialism, 1980, p. 20), and similarly, during the protest when they could not dispose of their sanitary pads or flush away their menstrual blood. Being in prison removed the possibility to hide menstruation. Instead of being consumed with the shame of having to remove saturated pads in front of prison guards the menstruators turned their exposed menstrual blood into the possibility for resistance and political action.

Because the bloody protestors were denied the ability to hide, they were forced to rethink what their menstruating bodies could do, to rethink their “capacities, instrumentalities or actions” (Butler and Taylor, 2010). This rethinking took the form of mobilising the vulnerability coming from their Catholic communities and the prison environment. In the journey from their Catholic communities to Armagh Goal a new possibility for the menstruating body was created by the bloody protestors, one which was deemed *inappropriate* by many and *unfitting* to Catholic, republican, and feminist communities, but one which ultimately was *magical* in its mapping of a new meaning of the menstruating body.

CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER TWO

This thesis could have focused solely on what was done to these menstruators: shamed, forced strip searches, menstrual products regulated and rationed. By instead focusing on what their menstruating bodies did in response I hope to have mapped some of a menstruating bodies possibilities for acting: new role models of power and force and contemporary anasyrmas who use their menstruation as a protective force for change. As noted at the beginning, examining histories creates the possibility to “reenergize contemporary activists everywhere” (Bobel, 2008, p. 739), and

⁴⁹ Considering that menstrual cycles can change under times of great stress (such as going to prison and taking part in a political prison in prison) and can change if synchronising with other menstruators, the idea of only giving menstrual products to menstruators at the exact time they told officers they would get their period is ridiculous to say the least.

I hope that mapping new possibilities for what a menstruating body can do creates a new *redprint* for how menstruators can harness their menstrual blood as a political tool against injustice.

Women of Ireland, stand up and declare.
Women of Ireland, understand your power.
(D'Arcy, in Moore, 2000)

CHAPTER THREE

MENSTRUAL THEMED TWEETS FOR BODILY AUTONOMY

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER THREE

Throughout this chapter I will analyse the menstrual themed tweets with concepts used in chapter two and with new theoretical frameworks. In section one I will explore how the menstruating body acts as a differentiating process on twitter, the concept of *relationality*, questions about tweets as activism, Hélène Cixous' essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1991), and how these tweets reintroduced the reproductive/menstruating body into the abortion rights campaign discourse. In section two I examine how the humour and gore of menstrual blood can be used in menstrual activism, while section three moves through a discussion of menstrual role models and how new role models can be created. Section four connects the concept of *menstruality* with relationality, showing how these tweets present more embodied experiences than just menstruation. This chapter discusses only some of the 186 menstrual tweets which I found. The tweets illustrate the diversity of menstruators experiences in today's Ireland, while also demonstrating what happens when menstruators collectively take up space and use their menstrual blood as a tool to amplify their voice:

@EndaKennyTD 52% of the population is female & we usually menstruate 5days/month. Or 60days/yr That's a lot of bloody tweets! #repealthe8th (Roth, 2015)⁵⁰

SECTION I – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: MARKING THE REPRODUCTIVE/MENSTRUATING BODY

1. Relationality

The connectivity of the menstruating body to its environment, history, and political/social discourse, can be understood with the term *relationality*. The relationality of the body is central to both Butler's vulnerability/resistance paradigm and Deleuze's question of 'what can a body do'. Butler suggests that "we rethink the relationship between the human body and infrastructure so that we might call into question the body as discrete, singular and self-sufficient" (Butler, 2016, p.

⁵⁰ I have cited all of the tweets together in a separate bibliography after the literature bibliography.

21). In doing so she proposes that we understand “embodiment as both performative and relational, where relationality includes dependency on infrastructural conditions and legacies of discourse and institutional power that precede and condition our existence” (*ibid*, p. 21). This understanding of the relationality of the body echoes Deleuze’s argument that “a body’s structure is the composite of its relation” (Deleuze, 1990, p. 218), all that makes up the body is interdependent and relational; bodies are made up of diffracted patterns of difference and multiplicity. For this thesis I understand relationality as how the environment and past discourse make up the capabilities of what the menstruating body can do in our current political and social environment. In many ways the menstruating body is explicitly relational; menstrual taboos and stigmas have always sought to regulate how the menstruating body relates to others, to its environment and to itself – *its relationality has always been visible*. Throughout this chapter I will explore how the menstruating body relates to the specific situation of the Irish abortion rights campaign.

2. *Tweeting for Choice*

The Materialities of Tweets

As discussed in chapter one, by analysing these tweets I hope to ‘re-insert the body into texts’. While online activism (clicktivism/slacktivism) has been criticised for its lack of effectiveness and commitment,⁵¹ how does its efficacy change when activists are describing their menstrual clots to the taoiseach? How visceral can the body be in virtual and online spaces? How do the *materialities* of the menstruating body, embodied in text and described in a tweet, act as disruptive difference⁵² to the ‘usual’ models of online activism?

⁵¹ In an interview with Chris Bobel she discussed online menstrual activism and her concern that the act of clicking/liking images of Rupi Kaur’s blood stained sheets, or of Kiran Gandhi running a marathon while freebleeding, might use up our creative/political energy leaving little energy for off-line activism:

I’ll share my frustration, which is that my students included, will be happy to share Rupi Kaur’s stained you know sweatpants photograph or you know the story of Kiran Gandhi’s free bleeding marathon but it’s just a click. It’s not an authentic engagement with the issue, it’s just sort of isn’t this rad you know. And so I worry that we sort of empty out the political potential when we only engage with the creative act ... And you go back to you know hiding you period, or making a PMS joke, or using single use products that pollute the environment ... so basically [you] don’t alter your practice at all you just sort of consume the cool thing. Isn’t she amazing?! But you can be amazing too, we can all be amazing. (Bobel, 2017)

⁵² As discussed in chapter one, I hope to approach the differences between the menstruating body and the non-menstruating body not as a “benign diversity” but as “difference as disruption” (Murdolo, 1996, p. 69 in Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p. 110).

*“I didn’t repaint my half of the world”*⁵³

In ‘The Laugh of The Medusa’ Hélène Cixous (1991) discusses *écriture féminine*⁵⁴ and writing from the body. Cixous considers what feminine writing ‘*will do*’ when women put themselves into texts, and therefore into the world and history (*ibid*, p. 875). For Cixous, *écriture féminine* is the possibility for women to take up space with their writing, for “woman’s *seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based *on her suppression*” (*ibid*, p. 880, italics in text). Cixous understands *écriture féminine* as writing with the possibility of creating change (*ibid*, p. 879), after all “[a] feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic” (*ibid*, p. 888). The act of writing *from* the excluded body is disruptive, and Cixous notes how exceedingly important this is in a phallogocentric society. In 140 characters these menstrual tweeters have marked the difference of the menstruating body, illuminating how their vulnerability can be mobilised into resistance – or, to quote this passage from Cixous once again: “with such force in their fragility; a fragility, a vulnerability, equal to their incomparable intensity” (*ibid*, p. 886). These activists write from their bodily experience of menstruation – “your body is yours, take it” (*ibid*, p. 876) – in order to make a *bloody* mark on the discourse of abortion rights movement in Ireland today.

*Reintroducing the Reproductive/Menstruating Body*⁵⁵

These menstrual themed tweets re-inserted the reproductive/menstruating body into the abortion rights discourse. Anti-choice campaigners have long centralised the foetus, the family, or ‘creation at conception’ on their side of the ‘debate’ – anything *but* the reproductive/menstruating body. The recent posters that the Irish Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform⁵⁶ were planning to display at airports in Ireland, which depicted the foetus seemingly floating in space (The Journal, 2017), are a clear example of this. The anti-choice campaign conceptualises the foetus, as Judith Butler might describe it, as “discrete, singular and self-sufficient” (Butler, 2016, p. 21). In contrast these tweets foreground the experiences of those who suffer most because of the Eighth Amendment, and in

⁵³ (Cixous, 1991, p. 876)

⁵⁴ For this thesis one of the centrally important elements of Cixous’ *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) is the relation it pinpoints between the repression of women’s bodies and the repression of women’s writings (Ryan, 2011).

⁵⁵ Throughout this thesis I have endeavored to use gender neutral terms such as ‘menstruators’, instead of gendering menstruation as always female. I will use the term ‘reproductive/menstruating body’ throughout this chapter when I am talking about both the body which menstruates and the body which is under attack because of its reproductive capacities.

⁵⁶ The Irish Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform is an anti-choice organisation which was originally founded in the United States.

doing so could be seen as a form of diffraction: shifting backgrounds and foregrounds to create new patterns of understanding (Haraway discussed in Lykke, 2010, p. 155).⁵⁷ These tweets re-introduce the embodied experiences of the reproductive/menstruating body into the abortion rights discourse.

SECTION II – HUMOUR AND THE GROTESQUE

1. The Use of Humour in Menstrual Activism

From Anger to Humour

In 2015 the abortion rights community were still angered by the death of Savita Halappanavar⁵⁸ and reeling from the news that in December 2014 a pregnant woman who was brain dead was artificially kept alive, against her family's will, because the foetus she was carrying still had a heartbeat (Carolan, 2014). Anger is often one of the first emotions felt at the continuous denial of reproductive health rights. Writing about black women's anger,⁵⁹ Audre Lorde said, "anger has eaten clefts into my living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone" (Lorde, 2007, p. 131). The Irish abortion rights movement creates a space for this anger to be made public, as Lorde wrote, "what you hear in my voice is fury, not suffering" (*ibid*, p. 132). The abortion rights campaign transforms and mobilises the suffering of Irish women⁶⁰ into anger at a country which exiles an estimated ten to twelve women a day in search of bodily autonomy and basic health care. The history⁶¹ of all that has been written on Irish women's bodies, and its continuation in how today's Ireland treats the reproductive body, makes us furious, and from fury comes the power to create change.

⁵⁷ As discussed in chapter two, the shifting of backgrounds and foregrounds creates diffracted patterns based on the "history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference" (Haraway, 1997, p. 273).

⁵⁸ Savita Halappanavar died in 2012 due to complications of septic miscarriage. She asked numerous times to have the pregnancy terminated over a three-day period, but died in hospital after being refused. Her husband was told that she was refused the termination as a foetal heartbeat was still present and because "this is still a Catholic country" (Enright, 2012).

⁵⁹ In using Lorde's work I wish to acknowledge the difference between the black women's anger she is writing about and the anger of women in Ireland. I do not wish to suggest that these two situations are the same, but instead take inspiration from how Lorde explores anger within activism.

⁶⁰ And people who don't identify as women but who can become pregnant.

⁶¹ For example, Magdalene laundries were run across Ireland from the late 18th Century, and the last one was closed just over 20 years ago in 1996. These laundries were run by nuns to 'rehabilitate' 'fallen' women. In reality these laundries were cruel, cold institutions where any 'deviant' woman, or girl, could find herself. Not many left the laundries without dying.

But as Grainne Maguire, who started the menstrual tweets, wrote, “no one finds an angry woman funny, or even likeable, for that matter, so no one listens” (Maguire, 2015). So Maguire transformed her anger into humour and began tweeting about her menstrual cycle.⁶² Menstruators across Ireland joined her and began using humorous descriptions of their menstrual cycles to demand bodily autonomy.

Both Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs have argued that humour plays an important role in menstrual activism in the form of zines, chants,⁶³ performances and online activism (Bobel, 2010, p. 131). Bobel charts the long history of feminist comic tradition – both inside and outside of menstrual activism – including the classic ‘If Men Could Menstruate’ by Gloria Steinem (1978), demonstrating how using these “lighthearted tools [can] stimulate dead-serious conversation and promote personal and social change” (Bobel, 2010, p. 131). It is the transformation of anger into humour in many of these tweets which make them so compelling and powerful. As Cixous writes, “[y]ou only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (Cixous, 1991, p. 885). These menstrual themed tweets challenge the taoiseach to look at menstruators and the messiness of menstrual blood straight on, and they are angry but they are also laughing.

⁶² Maguire’s tweets to the taoiseach were multiple, but this is how it all started:

Since we know how much the Irish state cares about our reproductive parts-I call my womb Ireland's littlest embassy ;-) #repealthe8th (1/3)

I think its only fair that the women of Ireland let our Leader @EndaKennyTD know the full details of our menstrual cycle #repealthe8th (2/3)

Hey @EndaKennyTD just so you know, I got my period two days ago. Pretty heavy flow at first but now just occasional spotting #repealthe8th

Hi @EndaKennyTD no period today. Just regular vaginal discharge but nothing I think to be worried about. Slight itching maybe? #repealthe8th

Hi @EndaKennyTD nothing today. Just general discharge & light to medium itching. Might stock up on some tampons while i'm out #repealthe8th

to all the women tweeting @EndaKennyTD their period news. They can take our human rights, but they'll never take our humour #repealthe8th (Maguire, 2015).

⁶³ In *New Blood* Bobel discusses the use of chants by menstrual activists. She discusses this in relation to ‘radical cheerleading’ – defined as “activism with pom poms and middle fingers extended [...] all about kicking corporate ass, taking on the social justice and women’s issues of the day, and having a fucking blast doing it” (Sparkle Motion! quoted in Bobel, 2010, p. 122) – and in relation to a kind of protest called ‘zap action’ by groups such as the Womens International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH), which in a form of ‘guerrilla theater’ hexed institutions complicit in the patriarchy and created chants for the purpose (Bobel, 2010, p. 124).

Can I... ?

One of the tactics these menstrual tweeters used was to ask the taoiseach often humorous questions about their periods. In one of my personal favourites an activist asks:

@EndaKennyTD your the man to ask yeh?...An bhfuil cead agam dul go dtí an leithreas? I've got my period. #repealthe8th (Soggy Boggy, 2014)

While the Irish language is rarely spoken in Ireland today, 'An bhfuil cead agam dul go dtí an leithreas' is one of the most widely understood phrases, meaning 'can I go to the bathroom'. Other questions include: whether to switch from tampons to pads, asking him to write a sick note for the boss, advice on getting mooncups out, advice on what to do with the blood collected in the mooncup, or asking for stories about his "most difficult period and how you dealt with it" (myhubbiesdinner, 2015).⁶⁴ Another of my favourites asks:

@EndaKennyTD - What is your opinion on period stained panties? Throw out or a good wash? #repealthe8th (jetjet, 2015)

These tweets highlight the humour and absurdity of asking the non-menstruating taoiseach what to do with one's own menstruating body, while also making public the menstruating body and all its needs and wants. With these questions the activists are challenging the ideas of what the Irish menstruating body should do: the Irish menstruating body should not make public details of its period, should be exiled when it wants or needs an abortion, and should not make trouble or ask questions. These tweets suggest new possible models for what the menstruating body can do – *what can a body do*. The activists are reclaiming their bodies against oppression by asking questions, describing the messiness of period blood, making the period public, and (as will now be discussed) making jokes.

Period Fun/Pun

Bobel writes that humour in menstrual activism can "counter [...] the perception of feminists (of all eras) as humourless, dry, or overserious. Their intent is to draw in readers who might otherwise find this taboo topic too gross or too personal" (Bobel, 2010, p. 125). In a number of the tweets activists used humorous descriptions of the experience of menstruating:

@EndaKennyTD PRAISE BE! I have finished my last period of the year :) Enda lets celebrate! #repealthe8th (Bauer, 2016)

@EndaKennyTD @GrainneMaguire. period arriving a week early?! Typical govt body, takes no notice of my wee hopes & plans. #repealthe8th (Honest Tulip, 2015)

⁶⁴ See Appendix 2 for this group of tweets.

@EndaKennyTD so delighted my period is coming to an end - it was dull & painful, a bit like your term in office #repealthe8th (Medb, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD if Dublin bus were as frequent as my period sure we'd all be laughing!
#repealthe8th (Dockry, 2015)

Here the activists illuminated the various experiences of living in a menstruating body: celebrating the end of your period, unexpected periods, dull and painful periods, and infrequent periods. Making the ins and outs of periods public is (as discussed in chapter two) a form of menstrual activism, and humour helps make visible the tabooed and stigmatised. Humour compels the reader/viewer to look straight at the problem, and instead of seeing it as a threat, sees the possibilities for change and the absurdity in the situation.

2. *Bloody Gore*

A series of these tweets also exposed gory details of the menstruating body, combining the humorous with the *taboo* and the *disgusting*. In descriptions of accidental free bleeding,⁶⁵ clots, running out of knickers, “crime scene bed sheets”, itchiness, discharge, constipation, pools of blood, post C-section periods, and wonky cervixes,⁶⁶ these activists used ‘shock tactics’ to engage, and enrage, the public. As Bobel writes “[i]n-your-face humour that incorporates an element of shock to awaken consciousness is common in menstrual activist discourse” (Bobel, 2010, p. 125).

One of the goriest, most tactile, most visceral (and most hilarious) tweets is the following:

@EndaKennyTD Time to go to the loo. Ah. Chunky chunky chunky period.
MMMMmmmmmm. Crimson Wave Detritus. How was your lunch? #repealthe8th
(Clancy, 2015)

In this move of radical exposure all menstrual shame and vulnerability is replaced with a sense of powerful pride in the possibility that what the menstruating body does might put the leader of the country off his lunch. How powerful is the taoiseach if he can be put off his lunch after reading this tweet? The latent power of menstrual blood to disgust is unmistakable here.⁶⁷ This activist

⁶⁵ Period The Menstrual Movement describe free-bleeding as:

a movement in which menstruators reject the usage of menstrual hygiene products in order to protest corporate control of menstruators’ bodies and wellbeing. Free bleeders openly bleed into their garments or without any menstrual hygiene products to raise awareness of the reality of the stigmatization of menstruation and to stand in solidarity with those who may not be able to afford menstrual hygiene products. (Period The Menstrual Movement, 2017).

⁶⁶ See Appendix 3 for these group of tweets.

⁶⁷ Much like in chapter two where the latent power of menstrual blood to disgust was made apparent through journalist Tim Coogan’s reaction and horror to the bloody protest in Armagh Goal.

revels in the visceral description of her menstruation in order to make a political demand for bodily autonomy. The tweet also suggests the joy of messy public menstruating. These tweets are the anasyrma of the digital age, they reveal the menstruating vulva and all it secretes in 140 characters, relishing in its possibility to disgust to the point of protection.⁶⁸ The Virgin Mary's 'divine composure' has been thrown off in order to revel in the freedom and power of the monstrous:

Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a ... divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster? (Cixous, 1991, p. 876)

3. *Self-Exposure*

These tweets ask: what can a menstruating body do when it is no longer possible to keep hidden? It could be argued that Ireland's abortion ban pushes the menstruating body out of the shadows, just as the prison system did during the bloody protests. By making abortion a matter which is not discussed and decided between a woman and her doctor, the Eighth Amendment forces the reproductive/menstruating body into the public sphere. The reproductive/menstruating body is everyone's business. Like the bloody protestors, the menstrual tweeters transform this exposure of the reproductive/menstruating body into an opportunity for activism:

@EndaKennyTD I hate when the box of tampons runs out mid period. I know you can't fix that but you can #repealthe8th (O'Brien, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD how's your #period treating you? Oh Wait. You wouldn't know. You should ask over a million Irish females that do #repealthe8th (Laura B, 2015)

The Irish reproductive body is a site on which the government acts. When a referendum is called, the Irish population will write their personal opinions of abortion onto the bodies of Ireland's women. By tweeting about their menses – their vulnerability – these activists convert the exposure of the reproductive/menstruating body by the government into a self-exposure which resists all that is written on their bodies. *Bodies write back.*

⁶⁸ Anasyrma as a tool of protection has long been depicted in folklore and history. In an Irish folklore story (Táin Bo Cuailnge) Cúchullain's uncle opposes him and sends 150 women "utterly naked, all at the same time, and the leader of the women before them, Scandlach, to expose their nakedness and their boldness to him", the story tells that Cúchullain lowered his eyes to avoid seeing the women and thus lost his power. (Raising the Skirt, 2017b)

SECTION III – MENSTRUAL ROLE MODELS

1. Irish Icons

Throughout this thesis I have discussed the Irish role models of the Sheela-na-Gig and the Virgin Mary. Monica McWilliams (1993, p. 84) discusses Northern Irish female activists identification with Mother Ireland⁶⁹ and other Irish female role models and maps how rejections of Catholic/Patriarchal⁷⁰ images are matched with a reclamation of Irish culture and language, thus creating space for “different Irish mythological images of the Great Mothers of our culture – images of mothers as warriors, clever, imaginative, strong, cunning, wise and compassionate” (*ibid*, p. 84). These are, McWilliams argues, the images “which have been trampled down by the imposition of a narrow, patriarchal, colonial culture” (*ibid*, p. 84). This image of the trampling down of the ‘Great Mothers of our culture’, is echoed in the words of Cixous:

We the precocious, we the repressed of our culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the beviés [...] we are beautiful. (Cixous, 1991, p. 878)

Cixous and McWilliams paint a powerful image of how (Irish) female role models can be reimagined. In this section I will discuss how these menstrual themed tweets create a new role model for Irish menstruators: demanding, humorous, full of the possibilities and of the potential of menstrual activism.

2. Content of the Tweets

These tweets create a tapestry of possibilities for menstruators and are filled with different models of how to do menstrual activism. The possibilities for menstruators has expanded from the model of shame and secrecy of the Virgin Mary. This group of tweets illustrates a commitment by the activists to use radical menstrual exposure as an activist tool to create discussion and to highlight the archaic nature of Ireland’s abortion ban. Therefore showing how a menstruating body can

⁶⁹ The origins of the term ‘Mother Ireland’ are unknown, but Birgit Breninger suggests that it can be traced back to the beginning of colonisation in Ireland. When “[t]he coloniser and his patriarchal/virile idea of ‘his’ nation seemed to have necessitated the conception of the colonised nation in female terms to further strengthen the idea of difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Breninger, 2012, p. 84). Breninger further notes that the image of ‘Mother Ireland’ was often characterised as “a weak, helpless and passive woman” (*ibid*, p. 84), who was conceptualised in order to inspire nationalism and heroism in the men of Ireland.

⁷⁰ When talking about these Catholic/Patriarchal images I think in particular about the image of the Virgin Mary (Catholic) and of Mother Ireland (Patriarchal). Mother Ireland has been described as a tragic, stoic and dignified image (McWilliams, 1993, p. 84). Mother Ireland takes care of her husband, sons and brothers while they fight for her Ireland, an image of nationalism.

expose itself in a move of powerful protection for Irish women against today's 'evil': a government who refuses women's choice. These tweets vary largely in message, tone and goriness: there is no one way to menstruate, no one way to do menstrual activism. But what all these tweets hold in common is talking publically about menstruation and collectively making noise.

In many of the tweets we can feel the anger and weariness, but also the energy of the abortion rights movement.

We are angry:

@EndaKennyTD All over til next month! Thank God it was just a period; tampons are easier to remove than coat hangers. #repealthe8th (Doherty, 2015)

We are tired:

@EndaKennyTD When I have my period I like to eat chocolate and cry over my lack of bodily autonomy #repealthe8th (ghostface_shrillah, 2015a)

We are energised:

@EndaKennyTD On my period, maybe I'm just hormonal but I'm really craving a referendum! #Repealthe8th (Delany, 2015)

Other tweets talk about what can be done with menstrual blood, challenging societies understanding of menstrual blood as a waste product,⁷¹

@EndaKennyTD period blood can be beneficial to some plants #repealthe8th (Lady scabious, 2015a).

In descriptions of menstrual clots, the goriness of the menstruating body is once again humorously, and imaginatively, exposed,

@EndaKennyTD did you ever see a period clot? I had one before the size of a golf ball, freaked the living daylights outta me. #repealthe8th" (Computer User, 2015a).

Menstruators point to their worries of living in Ireland with a reproductive/menstruating body – what would happen if my period was not to come?

@EndaKennyTD My period came today! Not Pregnant! I dont have to worry about my womb being oppressed by the state for 9 months #repealthe8th" (McCormack, 2015).

⁷¹ In a classic article Emily Martin explores depictions of the egg and the sperm in scientific accounts of reproductive biology. Martin argues that menstruation is described as a wasted product:

the monthly cycle is described as being designed to produce eggs and prepare a suitable place for them to be fertilized and grown-all to the end of making babies. But the enthusiasm ends there. By extolling the female cycle as a productive enterprise, menstruation must necessarily be viewed as a failure. Medical texts describe menstruation as the "debris" of the uterine lining, the result of necrosis, or death of tissue. The descriptions imply that a system has gone awry, making products of no use, not to specification, unsalable, wasted, scrap" (Martin, 1991, p. 486).

Martin compares this to descriptions of sperm which are described as productive, active, doing agents.

Other tweets speak directly of how they think Ireland's abortion ban treats women,

@EndaKennyTD Sometimes my period is so heavy I have to treat my knicks the same way women are treated in Ireland: garbage. #repealthe8th” (ghostface_shrillah, 2015b)

@endakennytd it's full on tampon + pad today..not an unwanted pregnancy. That would be some bloody mess as an Irish woman. #repealthe8th” (Ailish, 2015).

Some tweets highlight the Irish government and population's refusal to respect or believe in women's rights to make a decision,⁷²

@EndaKennyTD Got my period today! Tampons or pads, what u think? Can't trust I'll make the right decision for myself... #repealthe8th” (Mc Mahon, 2015).

Another tweet highlights the models of how women *should* do womanhood in Ireland, returning to the model of the Virgin Mary,

@EndaKennyTD No period thanks to my IUD, taking up womb space instead of a fetus. Oh, am I doing the being a woman wrong? #repealthe8th” (Coogan, 2015).

This multitude of models creates a diffracted pattern taking “place at the edge of the future, before the abyss of the unknown” (Randolph in Haraway, 1997, p. 173), the unknown being a future of reproductive health rights and menstruating without shame, stigma, or secrecy.

SECTION IV – MENSTRUABILITY

Menstruality is a concept developed by the Red School, they describe it as:

the female life process of menarche, the menstrual cycle, menopause and the mature years. It is the woman's ground, her initiatory process and 'the mother cycle', out of which rises the initiatory path to motherhood that is conception, pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding. (Red School, 2017)

This concept sees menstruation as part of a larger puzzle, it connects the experience of menstruation with that of menarche, pregnancy, menopause, or miscarriage. Menstruality can thus be considered a form of *relationality*. In Deleuze's discussion of the relationality of the body he explores how for “*every idea that indicates an actual state of our body, there is necessarily linked another sort of idea that involves the relation of this state to the earlier state*” (Deleuze, 1990, p. 220, italics in text). Like relationality, menstruality connects the experience of the menstruating body with its past (and future) journey. Relationality and/or menstruality uncovers the wide range of interrelated

⁷² A recent poll in May 2017 found that only 23% of respondents thought abortion should be available on request. (The Irish Times, 2017)

experiences that menstruators experience over a lifetime, which are often veiled by oppression, stigma, and silence. Some of these tweets dealt with these experiences:

@EndaKennyTD women are more than a period cycle women are more than incubators...#repealthe8th (dawn5651, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD Hey Enda, I'm currently awaiting my period in the hope I'm not preggers in this "modern" country #repealthe8th (Stephany, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD I haven't had a period since early summer.pregnant ya see.delighted we are. BUT if anything were to go wrong... #repealthe8th (Soggy Boggy, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD just finished my 1st period since miscarrying our daughter. "Devastated" barely covers it. #repealthe8th (Dowling, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD 1st period since my stillborn baby. I carried her for 6weeks after her diagnosis, losing my mind with grief. #repealthe8th (Claire, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD post-morning after pill, blood all over the sheets, made my breasts sensitive, not to mention the heavy flow. #repealthe8th #ha (Cf, 2015)

These tweets address the fear of an unwanted pregnancy or foetal abnormalities, and the experiences of miscarriage or taking the morning after pill. In a move similar to the bloody protestors, these activists take some of the most vulnerable and silenced experiences of the reproductive/menstruating body and use them as a tool to shame the Irish state on a global platform.

While these tweets were intended to advance the argument for abortion rights their impact was much greater. They created a *redprint* for how we can discuss menstruation and all its messiness publically and powerfully. As Fahs writes,

[t]he study of the body is necessarily messy; I hope we can collectively revel in that messiness, find new ways to understand ourselves and each other, and attach the experience of our bodies to a fierce and shameless politics of resistance, rebellion and revolution. (Fahs, 2016, p. 11)

By exposing the relationality of experiences over a menstruators lifetime, these tweets mapped new role models for menstruators, displaying the connections that can be made between menstruating bodies at all stages of the life cycle.

CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER THREE

This chapter has returned to many of the themes discussed in chapter two – relationality, exposure, reclaiming the body, and the latent power of menstruation to disgust – and further explored them within the context of this group of menstrual themed tweets. While my aim is not to directly

compare these two case studies, I hope to have drawn connections between menstrual activism as it occurred in Armagh Goal in 1980 and on twitter in 2015. Examining these menstrual themed tweets demonstrated how menstrual activism is enriched by the introduction of the virtual menstruating body. Benefitting from the advances that have been made since 1980, these tweets were able to be more insistently celebratory and humorous in their radical exposure of menstrual vulnerability.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis I have worked with two central theoretical frameworks to examine these two case studies of Irish menstrual activism. The framework of vulnerability/resistance created an understanding of how menstrual shame, stigma and silence can be mobilised into a powerful method of resistance; the images of the Sheela-na-Gig and the Virgin Mary helped visualise how this mobilisation took place. The second framework was Deleuze's question of 'what can a body do?', which reframed the menstruating body as a collection of capacities and possibilities, re-assigning the discourse of menstruation away from oppression and taboos to the latent power menstruators hold. What became apparent through employing these theoretical frameworks was the fundamentally *disruptive* power of menstrual blood. These two case studies became menstrual activism, not because of their goals and aims, but because of their use of menstrual blood as a visceral tool for change. In doing this, they radically changed how Irish menstruators can understand their menses. This thesis opened up a plethora of other themes: role models, relationality, (self)exposure, *écriture féminine*, public bleeding, anasyrma, disgust and the grotesque, menstruality, body literacy. This knotted and distributed cat's cradle (Haraway, 1997, p. 268) of connections between menstruation and other forms of activism shows that menstrual blood is never an isolated fluid, but instead a lens through which new patterns are revealed.

As Cixous writes, "we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather of a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another" (Cixous, 1991, p. 882). This thesis has illustrated how the bloody protest was itself *a process of becoming*, where the Catholic backgrounds of the protestors collided with their embodied experiences as women in prison. Their involvement in the republican and feminist movements became a catalyst for the reclamation of a forgotten figure in Irish history – the Sheela-na-Gig. Thirty-five years later, again drawing on the power of menstrual blood, the menstrual tweeters united the abortion rights campaign with the history of menstrual shame, stigma and silence in Ireland to create radical new role models of what the menstruating body can do.

With Haraway's thinking tool of diffraction on my mind, I begin to see how these role models and icons have collected stories and meanings from each other, how "a figure embodies shared meanings in stories that inhabit their audiences" (Haraway, 1997, p. 23). The figures discussed throughout this thesis have taken on qualities from each other, creating a multi-layered role model,

a menstruating body that matters: an active menstruating body, a powerful menstruating body, a menstruating body which holds the possibility to create change. While menstrual activism has a long history, with many protests and actions taking place long before these women smeared their blood on the walls of Armagh Goal, menstrual activism must move out from the periphery of feminist activism in order to continue to achieve social transformation (ref Bobel). Just as this thesis aimed to move the menstruating body to the centre of analysis, I hope in turn that this thesis helps move menstrual activism to the forefront of our feminist futures.

Most importantly, I hope that by weaving these new role models together I have created a new pattern for what it is to be a menstrual activist. Our diffracted Sheela-na-Gig becomes a role model which can move across time, extending its powerful gesture of anasyrma into the digital age. What remains to be seen is whether this role model can move across space, outside of Ireland...

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1

The Armagh Women by Margaretta D'Arcy

In Black Armagh of the Goddess Macha,
Last February in the grey cold jail,
The governor Scott in his savage fury
Came down to break the women's will.
Forty jailers, my forty jailers,
From the hell of Long Kesh come down
And help me break these warrior women
Who will not yield to the power of the crown.

The forty jailers put on the armour,
Strapped on their helmets, took up their shields,
Then they beat the Armagh women, they beat them down,
They were sure they'd yield.
Three days he kept them locked up in darkness,
Locked up in filth you would not believe.
When he released them he was so conceited
That one and all he thought they would yield.

"If you have suffered" he smilingly said,
"It never happened; it was all just a dream.
Come out, come out and obey my orders"
But the Armagh women they would never yield
They'd never yield to Scott the governor,
They'd never yield till they broke him down.
He and his jailers were all locked in prison
By the women of Armagh jail

And there they remain, those warrior women,
Locked up in filth you could not believe.
They hold Scott and his warders powerless.
They hold them there, they'll never concede.
Women of Ireland, stand up and declare.
Women of Ireland, understand your power.
Make us see that together we'll do it
We'll tumble down their stone grey tower.

In Black Armagh of the Goddess Macha,
Last February in a cold grey cell...

APPENDIX 2

@EndaKennyTD so, i just got my period but they are out of my usual tampon, can i switch to a
pad?
#repealthe8th (jetjet, 2016)

@EndaKennyTD I might have to call in sick from my period cramps. Can you give my boss a
sick
note? #repealthe8th (BasicallyBillyElliot, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD Day three of my period and I sometimes have difficulty getting my mooncup
out,
any advice? #repealthe8th (SorchaNíLochlainn, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD moon.cups collect period blood any advice on what we can use it for? as a
society
#repealthe8th (Lady scabious, 2015b)

@EndaKennyTD tell us about your most difficult period and how you dealt with it?
#repealthe8th
(myhubbiesdinner, 2015)

APPENDIX 3

@EndaKennyTD just to let you know i got my period today & didnt realize so i was free
bleeding for ages i have a tampon now #repealthe8th (Eleanor*, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD I've had sore breasts since Friday, so I'm not too surprised my period's started.
V crampy and clotty this time. #repealthe8th (McGrath, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD Period FINALLY arrived. Changed my underwear 3 times even though I've
super tampons in. May run out of knickers. #repealthe8th (Conway, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD my period is over but there was 1 memorable day of the week when my bed
sheets looked like the scene of a crime. #repealthe8th (Carah, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD did I mention post c-section periods yet? The womb contracts to get the blood out and its not easy on the scar #repealthe8th (Computer User, 2015)

@EndaKennyTD @GrainneMaguire Going through tampons like there's no tomorrow, a heavy blood flow and wonky cervix will do that #repealthe8th (Mooney LLB, 2015)

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