

Two Stories and a Plea

by Eilish Rooney

L'auteure réfléchit sur la répercussion des idéologies politiques que les femmes du Nord et du Sud ont intégrées.

There was a new-found dignity and identity in the midst of poverty, and in defiance of the "outside world."

Human beings tell stories... They are crucial to human life... they mediate past and present, social condition and interior experience, inherited circumstance and agency, and collective and personal identity... internalized as part of identity, stories also foster the reflection that infuses them with new meanings.
(Shulman 295)

This article is based on my presentation to the Women's Education Research and Resource Centre (WERRC) Conference opening plenary session in May 1996. I had thought hard about what to say to the women gathered for the conference but couldn't find a "handle," a way in, to what I wanted to say about relationships between women within the North and between women North and South; about political, personal, organizational, and working relationships; and about power. As it turned out I did not actually mention this intention, or these relationships. But I broached all of these things in a fashion.

As the Dublin train pulled out of Newry station I was reading my notes and thinking about the presentation when I saw two tricolours flying high over a dilapidated, poor-looking housing estate. White distempored breeze block houses. I recognized the estate. I was brought up in a place like that; before the flags. The recognition gave me a way into the presentation.

A story of shame ...

Ballymurphy, in West Belfast, was built in the early 1950s to take the overspill from crowded accommodation in the city centre. Our family moved from "rooms" above a pub to temporarily sharing my granny's new house in Ballymurphy whilst our house was built across the street. Hundreds of families were moved in to these high-rent houses on the outskirts of the city; no transport, no schools, and no shops. But great wide open spaces for us kids. An adventure playground: the huge city cemetery "next door," the Falls Park, and in jumping distance, the Black Mountain for play and games.

Very soon Ballymurphy became short-hand for "problem estate" and "problem families." And I began to be aware of a shame attached to coming from there. The shame was not present *within* the estate but in encounters and dealings with those from outside. The "outside" comprised school for me. Ballymurphy kids were the ones most often in trouble of one sort or other and least often singled out for praise or recognition. The "outside" widened as I grew to puberty and into forming relationships with the opposite sex—or "chasing boys" as we called it. Like other young women, and with them, I ventured into dances in the town. I remember once being asked "home" by a fella who had his own transport. Unimaginable luxury. When he asked me where I lived I directed him to "the Whiterock," the red brick, pre-war housing estate, just below Ballymurphy. Whiterock houses still had outside toilets, and smaller rooms, some did not then have electricity; but neither was there any shame attached to belonging there. Coming from the Whiterock was "OK"—respectable in my understanding. The van stopped in one of the Whiterock

streets, I said good-bye, got out, and walked around the streets, until I knew the van, and the man, would be gone. And I made my way home.

I had shame in me about my origins. I smile with embarrassment at the figure I cut in my own memory, wondering whether or not the van had gone up the road or down, and whether or not the fella would double back and catch me making my way to my true home. An inconsequential moment, one of many such moments of small shames, failures of confidence, and failures of pride.

Shortly after I left Ballymurphy, in the late 1960s, it was transformed and became a great place to come from. By then the "troubles" were on the streets. Ballymurphy made the best barricades and was in the forefront of civil resistance in the form of the rent and rates strike. The place was alive with politics. There was a new-found dignity and identity in the midst of poverty, and in defiance of the "outside world." Sometimes this defiance was put on show for the "world" which, temporarily, had its media gaze turned on Ballymurphy. Deprivation was (and is) understood in different, communal, and powerful ways, not as something to be personally ashamed of. Many very undignified things happened. Awful brutalities were committed by people against each other with new-found, righteous, and political justifications. The transformation of Ballymurphy that I witnessed, and was part of, was profoundly related to the sectarian oppressiveness of the Northern Ireland state.

Those defiant flags over the Newry housing estate proclaim a prideful identity, in the midst of poverty, that I recognized. I have wondered, as I reflected on belonging to and coming from a place like that, what happens to that identity as the political mobilization that brought it into being

changes and is reconstituted? These questions also apply, differently but importantly, to the sprawling Protestant, working-class housing estates of West Belfast, with their prideful, defiant union jacks.¹

Awful brutalities were committed by people against each other with new-found, righteous, political justifications.

with the other sons and daughters of Ballymurphy who had managed to get apprenticeships (or marry into them!), 20 or so Protestant families lived amongst the 170 Catholic families. These Protestant families soon moved out in the mass population shifts of the early 1970s. People tried to persuade these families to remain but, understandably, they felt vulnerable. Their houses were then purchased by the housing executive who let them to displaced Catholic families. At the time, there was an active residents' association on the estate. I heard that the residents' association was to hold a meeting at which the decision would be proposed to refuse admission to membership of the association to the housing executive tenants (them being *tenants* and the rest of us being *residents*). If the situation were to arise today I would probably get a group together, get a constitution, and make a grant application to a funding body so that we could do something. At the time, I called together the willing young people and children of our street, wrote notes telling what was about to happen at this meeting, and where and when the meeting was to be held. We distributed a note to each house on the estate.

The meeting was packed. The de-

bate was furious. The tenants were admitted and, eventually, welcomed.

When I reflect on this I recognize, in the move to exclude the housing executive tenants from the residents' association, the operations of internalized shame. The people who proposed the exclusions were themselves the children of local working-class families. They were people from poor origins. But, having bought their own homes, they were setting out to assert and enforce a difference, to prove a difference between themselves and the "tenants," to create categories of "us" and "others." Maybe I recognized something, from my Ballymurphy shame. From my shameful longing to come from somewhere, anywhere, else; something about disowning origins, denying knowledge, and building barriers from that denial.

The story of the RTE aerial ...

On Friday, February 9th of this year we had a Radio Telefís Éireann (RTE—the state television station of the Republic of Ireland) aerial installed. I heard of the breakdown of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) cease-fire as the news came through on the radio that evening. I was angry, cried and cursed a lot, and couldn't understand. My anger at the inaction of the British Government over the year and a half of cease-fire found easy release. But the IRA planted the bomb killing two people. In frustration, I turned to RTE for coverage. Over the following hours, and days, I watched what I came to see as an orgy of breast beating. There seemed to be a need for almost everyone who appeared on the station to express their shame for the horror of Canary Wharf. This was my first time watching RTE coverage of "the North" and this apparent sense of responsibility for IRA actions, shared by everyone, came as a surprise to me. I couldn't understand it. I

talked to people in an effort to understand (and thereby learned who had RTE aerials, and who hadn't).

In watching and listening over the days I was conscious of television coverage being a *construction* of events, a made, put-together, selection, presentation, and structured context for, in this case, "the news." The new aerial enabled me to compare the different constructions North and South and in Britain. In considering people's reactions on RTE, and the uniformity of those reactions, I thought about the impact of the Republic's constitutional claim to the North, and the political responsibility and involvement it carries with it. Also, some time in the future people in the Republic may be asked to make decisions about their constitution—to place their mark on a ballot paper and thereby to confirm their participation, and play their democratic part, in the events in the North. I also considered the fears people in the south have of loyalist attacks (the IRA bomb London ergo the loyalists bomb Dublin). But none of these things, singly or together, provided adequate explanations for why so many people talked

None of these provided explanations for why so many people talked like they were responsible for the bombing.

like they were responsible for the bombing. And they seemed to want that responsibility and shame to be shared and affirmed by others. Collective condemnation of the IRA action appeared to have a cathartic effect on this shameful responsibility. Condemnation seemed like a collective mantra, to provide ease. For me it seemed too cheap a relief, too easy and vicarious

a response. But then, what was I looking for from RTE coverage?

We are all actors, differently positioned, in the political conflict in the North but that does not make us responsible for the IRA action. People expressing anger, outrage, fury, frustration, all of these would have been understandable and could have been debated. Shame silenced debate. The manner in which the people invited to give their views on RTE assumed by-proxy responsibility, disabled debate, and substituted a too-easily shared and expressed outpouring of emotion. This is what I have tried to understand. I accept that my agency is linked to the conduct of the violence, as it is to "the peace process." What people think and do matters. Although that thinking and doing needs to be mobilized to bring about change. But that is different from assuming personal or collective, shameful responsibility.

I began to wonder as I watched and listened to RTE whether there is an internalized shame of belonging that was activated by the bombing?² If so, what are the consequences for clear sighted, critical analysis? What are the consequences for the future? North and South, for our relationships? Have I misheard what the aerial was transmitting? I continue to watch, listen, and try to learn.

... and a plea

When Ailbhe Smyth asked me to contribute to this panel on "Straight Talking" I stilled my mind, to see what would come to the surface—as it were *needing* to be straight-talked about. I thought of the analogy between the mind and a still pond in the Ted Hughes poem "Pike." The poet watches with fascination and fear, and waits for what beauty, or monstrosity, may emerge from the deep:

For what might move, for what
eye might move
The still splashes on the dark
pond.

The stilling of my mind was not

like the preparation for an academic paper where I rifle my brain for ideas. What came up for me was "failure." Just that. Failure. The word, the feeling, the experience. The only connection my reasoning could make was with an abstract from a Samuel Beckett letter which I had recently read where he talked about failure:

Success and failure on the public level ... never mattered much to me. In fact I feel much more at home with the latter, having breathed deep of its vivifying air all my writing life, up to the last two years. (qtd. in Naughton 12)

I thought of the strains, of the pressure to succeed in women's groups and networks, of having to successfully gain funding in order to do the work, of report writing—and writing *up* the successes of a project. And generally I thought of the growing professionalization of the voluntary sector, and of the women's movement. And I thought of many of the good things about these pressures. But the strains of always reaching for success, of refusing to feel failure, hiding it, denying it, and then of being unable to learn from it, are debilitating. Not to taste its "vivifying air." This is where I started with the WERRC invitation. I made several attempts to describe personal failures and collective failures I have experienced and been a part of. And I couldn't. Feelings of shame got in the way.

I traced the sources of some of my sayable shames. But I could not talk here about them. Like many of you I have learned about how we have internalized shames and oppressions that are not ours to own. We need to utilize some of this knowing and experience in dialogue. Maybe I should put away the aerial (metaphorically) and find ways to dialogue and debate with you. To learn and to work on these things where possible and in different places in the North and South. We don't need to understand each other to learn from each other. We certainly don't need to agree with each other. I want to begin with the

most compelling problems facing us now. For me that is the disenfranchisement and "hidden injuries" of poverty in the midst of plenty, and what I believe have been our joint, and sometimes deliberate, political failures.

This article first appeared in Feminism, Politics, and Community, edited by Ailbhe Smyth (Dublin, WERRC, University College Dublin, 1996). Reprinted with permission.

Eilish Rooney's route into women's studies and adult education in the University of Ulster has been circuitous. It started by enjoying Anne of Green Gables being read aloud on Friday afternoons in St. Kevin's Primary School on the Falls Road. Shakespeare, Yeats, and T. S. Eliot were an evening class escape from nappies. Currently, investigating women in democracy can be a temporary escape from the fearful absence of democracy in the North.

¹I am not making some simple equation between flags, politics, and poverty. The political transformations within working-class republicanism have been little understood. The political challenges currently facing working-class loyalism could be transformative. But Belfast people, like me, always need reminding that the North is a predominantly rural society. Political identities have different formations and are differently experienced beyond the urban ghettos.

²Following the presentation one participant came up to me and offered an explanation for the outcry of "responsibility" from some public figures. She said that since the IRA ceasefire "everybody and their granny in the South had 'come out' as republican sympathizers."

Reference

- Naughton, John. *Observer Review* 31 March 1996: 12.
Shulman, G. "American Political Culture, Prophetic Narration, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Political Theory* 24.2 (1996): 295–314.