ABEI Journal – The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v. 25, n. 2, 2023, pp. 87-100.

Breaking Silences: Women, Citizenship and Theatre In Northern Ireland

Quebrando silêncios: Mulheres, cidadania e o teatro na Irlanda do Norte

Lisa Fitzpatrick

Abstract: *This essay seeks to weave together an analysis of women's citizenship and its dependency on certain silences, and the exploration of this tension in two recent productions by Belfast- based Kabosh Theatre Company. Kabosh, and company Artistic Director Paula McFetridge, stage work that examines the realities of the region in the post-conflict era. In constructing the theoretical frame for the analysis, the concept of "silence" and "silencing" draws from Kristie Dotson (2015), and from work on violence such as Gayatri Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence" and a wide range of sources on the performance of violence in theatre. Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic democracy shapes the discussion of the Northern Irish state, and Wendy Brown and Joane Butler are the key scholars for the consideration of citizenship and nation.*

Keywords: *Silence; Silencing; Affect; Shame; Democracy; Civil Rights; Gender; Activism.*

Resumo: *Este ensaio procura tecer uma análise da cidadania das mulheres e da sua dependência de certos silêncios e a exploração dessa tensão em duas produções recentes da Kabosh Theatre Company, com sede em Belfast. Kabosh e a diretora artística da empresa, Paula McFetridge, encenam uma obra que examina as realidades da região na era pós-conflito. Ao construir o quadro teórico para a análise, os conceitos de "silêncio" e "silenciamento" baseiam-se em Kristie Dotson (2015) e em trabalhos sobre violência, como o conceito de "violência epistêmica" de Gayatri Spivak e uma ampla gama de fontes sobre a representação da violência no teatro. O conceito de democracia agonística de Chantal Mouffe molda a discussão*

ISSN1518-0581 | eISSN2595-8127 | DOI 10.11606/issn.2595-8127.v25i2p87-100

Copyright © 2023 Lisa Fitzpatrick

sobre a Irlanda do Norte, e Wendy Brown e Joane Butler são as principais estudiosas para a consideração acerca da cidadania e da nação.

Palavras-chave: *Silêncio; Silenciamento; Afeto; Vergonha; Democracia; Direitos civis; Gênero; Ativismo.*

Introduction

Based in Belfast, Kabosh has developed an extensive repertory of new writing that engages with the social realities of contemporary life, under the artistic directorship of Paula McFetridge. One strand of the company's work tackles issues that directly relate to the conflict known as "the Troubles" and its aftermath[1] (CAIN Web Service, online; McKittrick & McVea, 2012), which might be described as a partial peace, with paramilitary activity largely confined to low-income segregated housing estates across the region (Coupe 2022). Another strand examines LGBTQI rights, asylum, poverty – issues that are urgent across numerous societies. The two productions discussed here illustrate this. *The Shedding of Skin*, written by Vittoria Cafolla and premiering in 2021, explores gender-based violence in conflict and brings that history to bear on post-conflict Northern Ireland; while the 2023 production of Rosemary Jenkinson's *Silent Trade* explores people trafficking and builds on Jenkinson's earlier play *Lives.In.Translation* which was produced by Kabosh for the Belfast Arts Festival in 2017. This essay explores these productions as texts and performances that examine and represent women's silences about misogynistic violence and marginalisation, and state and institutional practices of silencing that shape women's access to civil rights.

Northern Ireland is persistently represented by a "two communities" model that divides the population into Protestant and British, or Catholic and Irish. Although this model excludes immigrant communities and the growing numbers who reject both these labels, there remains a large percentage of the population who live in segregated housing and attend segregated schools. The "two communities" concept also shapes public funding policies, and is recognized in the Peace Agreement and formalized in the structure of the devolved government. These plays are part of a larger body of theatre practice in Northern Ireland that might be characterised as post-conflict, meaning that it seeks to engage its audience with the lived experience of the "other" community, with the long-term aim of opening dialogue and discussion, to secure a lasting peace and reconciliation. Kabosh, for the post-conflict strand of its work, tours mainly to single-community venues

and offers talkbacks and discussions after the shows, addressing community sensitivities about policing, economic opportunities, and competing versions of history. In the absence of government policies to address the various legacies of the conflict and the structural inequalities of the sectarian state that preceded it, this task has been passed to the arts and culture sector (Coupe 2022).

Art and Democracy

Chantal Mouffe argues that artistic practice can play an important role in democracy. In the West, theatre has a long, documented history of public debate with the state in its various forms from the Ancient Greek theatre onwards, and Mouffe sees potential in all kinds of artistic practice to "subvert the dominant hegemony" and to visualise and represent "that which is repressed and destroyed by the consensus of post-political democracy" (Mouffe 6). Her argument is based on opposition to liberalism, replacing it with an agonistic model of democracy in which decisions must be made between conflicting alternatives, and in which rational consensus is not achievable. Democracy is the "struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally", and the public space "is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation." She argues that "artistic practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order or in its challenging," and she concludes that "critical art is art that foments dissensus, makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony" (Mouffe 12).

Situating these performances in relation to Mouffe's argument brings them into direct collision with the UK government's repeatedly articulated vision for Northern Ireland – i.e., the dominant hegemony. In the decades since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and a lasting ceasefire, two contrasting representations of Northern Ireland have dominated public discourse: the Westminster government's use of the language of the marketplace to evaluate the region's progress towards a peaceful civil society, and a growing body of performance work that explores and reflects upon the traumatic events and the traces of the "Troubles" in everyday life – and these are in stark opposition. The current Conservative-led British government has characterized Northern Ireland as "open for business" and poised to reap a "peace dividend" in the form of increased foreign investment. The marketing of Fermanagh's natural beauty and tourism potential during

the G8 summit in 2013 and the decision to make Derry the first UK City of Culture in the same year, supports a process of strategically forgetting formative events like the Enniskillen Remembrance Day bomb or Bloody Sunday, to promote a "normalized" Northern Ireland. This language has persisted through the Brexit negotiations, with UK Prime Minister Sunak describing Northern Ireland as being in an "unbelievably special [economic] position" with potential for trading freely across both the EU and the UK. The language of neo-liberal economics measures social change in monetary terms and reduces community belonging and identity to individual choice. Yet personal and communal experiences of trauma and violence are bound into the landscape, communities, and politics of NI and cannot be simply wished away.

Like other work included within the umbrella term "theatre for social change", the two plays discussed here are concerned with making visible and audible experiences that are usually obscured, or obliterated, or contained within labels of victimhood or criminality. Such labels act to silence the individual, casting them as a symbol to be spoken about, or a criminal undeserving of human sympathy. Both plays explore violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland, one focused on the legacy and history of the conflict, the other on the contemporary issue of human trafficking. If post-conflict theatre and art might be positioned as anti-hegemonic resistance to neoliberal narratives of peace, then breaking the silence about women's experiences further resist these totalizing narratives. Northern Ireland is ranked as one of the most dangerous places in Europe for women, based on a murder rate that is almost entirely domestic or by perpetrators who are well known to the victim. The rates of sexual abuse and intimate partner violence are very high, a legacy of decades when policing and security measures were mainly focused on paramilitary acts, in the context of a very conservative society where traditional patriarchal models of the family acted as inhibitors on addressing domestic abuses. The issue of gender-based violence during and after the conflict has been consistently ignored and under-researched (Aisling Swaine, 2022; Ngozi Anyadike-Danes *et al* 2022; Anna-Lea van Ooijen *et al* 2023). The emerging, totalizing historical narratives of the conflict generally minimise intersectional explorations in relation to gender and sexuality; therefore, work that directly addresses violence against women and girls challenges the silencing and stifling of these histories, creating an agonistic response to the male-focused heteronormative hegemonic narratives.

Gender and Citizenship

Feminist theory has long pointed towards the gendered nature of citizenship, and the discursive construction of the normative "universal" citizen as male. In their explorations of nationalism and gender from the early 1990s onwards, scholars like Wendy Brown, Cynthia Enloe, and Joane Nagel have identified and analysed the operation of mainstream nationalist discourses and imagery as essentially male and conforming to a particular, heteronormative, concept of masculinity. Nagel's 1998 analysis is particularly useful because she examines nationalist icons of patriotic manhood and "exalted motherhood" that persist into right-wing nationalist discourse of the 2020s. These discourses seek to construct totalizing metanarratives of nationhood that cannot readily accommodate diversity. Eavan Boland writes of the Irish national literary tradition as "constraining" (Boland 148). Accusing Irish poets of "evading the real women of an actual past . . . whose silence their poetry should have broken", she asks how "real women with their hungers, their angers, endured a long struggle and a terrible subsistence . . . How then did they re-emerge in Irish poetry as queens, as Muses . . . That could happen only if Irish poets complied with the wishful thinking of Irish nationalism" (Boland 155).

Boland's essay points to the silences that mark women's histories and shape the terms of women's citizenship and civil rights. In recent years, Irish Studies has been concerned with previously silenced histories of the Magdalene Laundries, the Mother and Baby Homes, the systemic abuse of children by members of religious orders; rape and sexual violence in the War of Independence, the Civil War, and the conflict in Northern Ireland. Represented in art, mainly by women, these thematic concerns play out in images and narratives of knowing, not-knowing, refusing to hear, and processes of violent suppression of any who would speak publicly. The suppression of these histories, like the suppression of the original victims, maintains fictions of heroism, patriotism, national pride, comely maidens, and states that cherish all their citizens equally.

The Shedding of Skin

Commissioned by Kabosh Theatre Company and written by Vittoria Cafolla, *The Shedding of Skin* was directed by Paula McFetridge for an online premiere that streamed on YouTube in June 2021, when the theatres were still closed by the COVID-19 restrictions. The play was subsequently revised and performed live in Derry and Belfast in June 2022. The play addresses rape in wartime, drawing on international examples but situating a range of experiences of Northern Irish women within the storyline. The work aims to

point to both the ubiquity of rape and war, and the particularity of the local experience. It uses the framing device of the Eumenides or Furies from Greek mythology and tragedy, who persecute those who have committed crimes against the family and against hospitality, until the judgement of Athena redirects their activities towards the protection of justice, rather than vengeance. Often described as three sisters, daughters of the Night and the Underworld, these ancient deities are fearsome to behold. Their association with crimes against the family and household is important for the text, where many of the recounted and performed scenes of violence are situated within the supposedly safe space of homes and family relationships.

Performed by a cast of four actors, the play opens with a rising soundscape mingling industrial sounds with radio reports of atrocities that blend into a high-pitched hum and then cut out. The lights come up on with three robed figures (the Furies) in front of a cracked standing-stone, while a young woman, Samantha, lies unconscious on the grass before them. It is dawn. The lighting mutes the colours of the set and costuming, so that the colour palate shifts from grey overtones to sharp, vivid colour by the end of the performance. With a running time of approximately 70 minutes, the play is performed with no interval. The plot follows the discovery of Samantha, who has arrived at this in-between world for the Furies to gather her experiences of sexual violence. They act as repositories for these stories, bearing the grief and pain on behalf of the world. They are named according to the sections of the globe that they represent: Sinead standing for Western Europe, Tereza for the East, and Ruth for the ancient Levant. However, on this day something is different: the Furies rarely meet all together, and Samantha's arrival is outside of the norm. As Samantha awakens, the dialogue establishes the scene as Cave Hill, just outside Belfast, Samantha's hometown. The play is constructed of women's testimonies of war, gathered from documentary sources, play texts, novels, and newspaper reports. The Furies recount snippets, sharing horrors, sometimes laughing as they do so.

Cafolla writes the Furies as hybrid creatures who inhabit the remains of human women: Sinead's memories include her own experiences as an IRA woman in Belfast, for example, but she will eventually move on to another plane of existence and her work will be taken on by another. She and Tereza speak of someone who will come and change their futures, offering healing or reconciliation. Costumed in hooded robes, the Furies have blood-stained hands, explaining that the suffering they absorb results in a constant menstruation, but also linking menstrual blood to the women in Armagh prison during

the blanket protest of the 1970s and 1980s. Sinead's testimony of her experiences of gender-based violence in the IRA refers to rape by her commanding officer,[2] while Tereza "puts her hands in her knickers during the following and starts to smear blood on the rocks around her" (Cafolla, unpublished script, 20). Sinead continues:

> Sinead
>
> I have smeared my menstrual blood on the walls along with shit and piss. Shit mixed with that metallic scent, 23 hours a day red gleaming turning black. Crying. Squalling like a baby. We are trying- struggling- to be born again.
>
> Tereza
>
> They have decided that the women should not hunger strike. It distracts from the men's efforts-
>
> Sinead
>
> (bitter)
> Equality achieved – (Cafolla, unpublished script, 20)

The "blanket protest" or "dirty protest" began in the late 1970s when the British government removed the "political" or "special" status from paramilitary prisoners, forcing them to wear prison uniforms, take part in prison labour, and limiting and monitoring their interactions. The long-running protests included the "blanket protest" in which prisoners refusing to wear uniforms wrapped blankets around their naked bodies, and, in 1981, a hunger strike in which ten men died. The protests by the men are well known and are commemorated in murals in Catholic areas of Northern Ireland, but the women's protests – which began in slightly different circumstances – have been largely ignored (Christina Loughran, 1986; Laura Weinstein, 2007; Jolene Mairs (online)). The particular impact of the protest for women was that they had no access to sanitary products when they were menstruating, so smeared the blood onto the walls. By speaking on stage of women's biology, and seeming to smear the often-abjected menstrual fluid onto the set, the play draws attention to the lived, visceral impact of the conflict on the lives of women and to the silencing of that experience through processes of disgust and shaming.

The Shedding of Skin seeks to confront and challenge processes of silencing women's bodily experiences of the conflict: experiences of the infiltration of the war into the private space of the home, the abuse of children, sexual threat used to police women's

sexualities, and rape. Many abuses, particularly those imposed by the State such as strip searching, are silenced by criminalising those who bear witness to them. More commonly, these experiences are silenced because women are positioned as "exalted mothers" (to use Nagel's term), or as virgins, who attest to the honour of the nation in their modest demeanour. These particular impacts of war reveal acts of violence by respected members of the community, military or paramilitary heroes, martyrs.

Kristie Dotson links silencing to violence, specifically drawing upon Gayatri Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence". Spivak defines "epistemic violence" as a form of violence that seeks to eliminate the knowledge held by marginalized groups such as migrant workers, indigenous peoples, or other socially and politically disempowered sections of society (Spivak qtd in Kristie Dotson 236)[3] through processes that systematically devalue their knowledge and their status as holders of useful knowledge. Dotson illustrates how such silencing takes place in practice, offering examples of two kinds of epistemic violence where marginal subjects are giving testimony. She demarcates two kinds of silencing: "testimonial quieting" and "testimonial smothering." According to Dotson, "testimonial quieting" occurs when an audience "fails to recognize a speaker as a knower" (Dotson 242; Patricia Hill Collins, 2000). In this instance, the audience fail to recognize the knowledge and authority of the speaker because of external factors, outside of what is being said, typically race, gender, caste, social or organisational status.

Both forms of silencing are related to ignorance, as both "not knowing", and as the deliberate rejection of knowledge that challenges the individual's preferred world view named by Dotson and others as "pernicious ignorance". "Testimonial smothering", on the other hand, she defines as "the truncating of one's own testimony in order to ensure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence" (Dotson 244).

Dotson's idea might be used concerning women speaking about domestic or sexual violence in Northern Ireland: in a divided society, if they are speaking against members of their own community they may be silenced because their testimony will feed negative stereotypes of their community. Members of the RUC, UDR, UDA, UVF, IRA, INLA, the Hunger strikers – if these are your heroes and the protectors of your community, then you may not be able to denounce individuals among them as wife-beaters, rapists, or child abusers. Your community is not likely to believe you, and you are likely to be blamed or punished for disloyalty.

Silent Trade: Human Trafficking on Stage

Silent Trade is a play in ten scenes about human trafficking. There are five characters: Precious, the young Nigerian woman who has been trafficked to Belfast; Erin, who is from Belfast and whose husband is Nigerian; Rab, the pimp, who takes Precious from Erin; Suze, a Belfast drug addict and prostitute who also works for Rab and who befriends Precious (who was played by the actor playing Erin), and Niall, an undercover police officer who visits the brothel to gather information. Precious has been brought to Northern Ireland as a domestic servant but is later sold into prostitution, and Suze is a young Belfast woman who is in debt and is forced to work as a prostitute by loan sharks (who are often paramilitaries). The play's focus is international and internal trafficking and aims to raise awareness of both. The title, "Silent Trade", refers to an ancient practice also called silent barter. It is a method by which traders who don't speak the same language can trade without talking, and it also refers to a process whereby the traders do not need meet each other. This describes the process in the play, where the traders have as little contact as possible, and only one – Rab, the pimp – is visible or audible on stage. The title also describes the silence surrounding this commerce in human beings, the absence of press and media coverage of the practice, and the resulting lack of public awareness or concern. And it can also describe the ways that the criminals to carry out this abuse benefit from the hostile anti-immigrant rhetoric that misrepresents anti-trafficking activists and silences survivors.

Silent Trade draws upon research by Jenkinson into human trafficking in Belfast, including interviews with people who have knowledge of the practice from the city's Nigerian community. The episodic plot unfolds chronologically: it opens with Erin explaining to Precious that she is to be Erin's unpaid maid, housekeeper, cook and child-minder. Precious will also clean other houses in the "community" and will be collected by van in the mornings.

The opening line spoken on stage is "So, this is your room", from Erin; it is briefly confusing because she and Precious are clearly in a kitchen. She continues:

> Kettle, cooker, washing mach. . . well, you don't need a full inventory . . .
>
> . . .
>
> You'll sleep here and you'll stow your bedding back in this cupboard as soon as you get up, ok? (Jenkinson 17).

Not only is Precious to sleep in the kitchen, but she is also instructed not to talk to anyone at the school when she is leaving or collecting the children. She is to be as hidden as possible: Erin tells her "When you're alone keep the blinds closed at all times . . . The back door is locked. I keep the key on me" (Jenkinson 17).

The exposition continues with Precious asking about her passport and visa, but Erin dismisses her, saying "Is there passport control on the Newtownards Road? If so, it's news to me". Her husband Joseph has the passport, and she says they will "attend to" these legal matters and concludes with a warning to Precious that if she's discovered she'll be sent to jail, and that Joseph will make trouble for her family at home in Nigeria (Jenkinson 19). The scene rapidly establishes for the audience the key information about human trafficking: that it is happening in Belfast in middle-class homes, that trafficked workers are unpaid and subjected to a kind of frightful semi-invisibility by their "employers" who threaten them with prison, deportation, and dire circumstances for their families. Precious has clearly been promised relative wealth in the affluent West; she had promised her mother money every month. Erin makes clear that this will not be possible – "We're already giving you meals, accommodation and we forked out a flat fee [for you] to Yosola" (Jenkinson 19). If everything goes well, Erin says they might send Precious' mother something in about six months.

The play emphasises silence: Precious is not to speak to anyone, anywhere. She is not to speak at the school gates, or at the doctor's office; she is not to speak to the neighbours, she is not to make friends. She should be invisible, as far as possible. This silencing protects her traffickers, but is framed as protecting her and her family, and she has no recourse beyond Erin and her off-stage husband. This silencing effectively disables Precious's claim on any rights associated with her humanity or her personhood. She has no bed to sleep in, no money for her work, and no security of any kind. She has no access to the law for protection, so is vulnerable to all kinds of violence and abuse.

Erin, the Northern Irish wife of Joseph Adebayo, is a finely balanced character who manages to be simultaneously human and appalling. Played with a slightly frantic, nervous energy by Louise Parker, she dismisses Precious's legitimate questions and appeals with a sarcastic humour that does not appear to be deliberately malicious. So when Precious asks about money, Erin asks "How are you planning to earn it, by becoming some sort of celebrity supernanny?" She explains that she is out a lot because of her work, "so I expect you to work hard without me there to whip you on. (*Laughs ironically*). Not that I mean whip you literally" (Jenkinson 20). With her extraordinary insensitivity and obliviousness to language (whipping) that recalls historic African slavery, Erin is obtuse,

hideously comic, and recognizably human. She occasionally confides in Precious, sharing her concerns about her husband and his mother. Precious, played by Lizzy Akinbami, maintains an air of quiet resignation throughout, occasionally smiling and indicating incomprehension by shaking her head or shrugging. Her silence allows her to maintain some dignity in a dreadful situation; she rarely shows emotion, apart from a brief phone call that she grabs with her mother. In scene three a few weeks later, Precious is roughly awoken by Erin: her presence has been discovered and she has spoken to someone at the local petrol station. "Joseph's raging and he's made his mind up. We can't keep you here any longer" Erin tells her. She adds that Precious is "lucky he's not here to take it out on you himself" (Jenkinson 27). They are selling her on, in Erin's words; when Rab arrives on stage shortly afterwards it is clear that Precious has been sold to a brothel. Erin is paid £200 and Precious's "consultant" as the trafficker is referred to, has been told. No money is given to Precious. The play demonstrates the concept of "silent trade" as Precious is passed about by people who are never visible on stage: her "consultant", Joseph, Yosola. Rab, the pimp, takes her from Erin without ever meeting the original trafficker, though clearly they will be sharing the income from Precious from this point forward. In this way, the traffickers and those holding Precious in slavery avoid prosecution: the network is structured to operate in small self-contained cells.

The play never shows violence explicitly, yet the whole performance is underpinned with a sense of threat. The trafficked women are in a highly precarious situation, dependent on pleasing the men who effectively own them. For Precious, this means her "agent", to whom she is ever in debt no matter how hard she works. Joseph, never seen on stage but present through Erin's words and stories, must also be endlessly appeased by the women in his household. This includes his daughter (who must take care of her appearance and her chastity), his wife, and Precious. She must also appease her pimp and therefore must please the anonymous clients who pay him to have sex with her. The play does not dwell on the horror for Precious, who is a modest and religious woman, in being forced into this work; rather, it stages her resilience and her burgeoning friendship with Suze. But the script and the performance are effective in creating a dread in the spectators at what they might be forced to witness. Scene four opens with Suze on stage, dressing after her last client, when Rab enters singing "The House of the Rising Sun". In their brief dialogue, Suze tells him that "the last girl still keeps crying", and Rab responds telling her to "break this one [Precious] in nice. I explained the score on the way here ... Looks like the fight's already been kicked out of her" (Jenkinson 30). Rab supplies both women with pills and gives Suze a bottle of vodka, to help them tolerate their situation. The dialogue and

action suggests the possibility of a scene between Precious and a client, that might even be forceful and violent. Having already developed a sympathetic relationship with Precious in the preceding scenes, to see this new degradation on stage would be distressing.

Precious has a voice but cannot be heard. She is threatened repeatedly with the dangers of speaking which will bring harm on her, her employers, and her family at home. Furthermore, her race and her work as a prostitute devalue her testimony, so she is effectively silenced again by the institutions of the stage. She is framed in public discourse as an unreliable witness, one who cannot be trusted to tell the truth. Her fellow prostitute Suze is in a similar situation. Although Suze believes she has repaid her debt in full, when she states this the pimp ridicules her and tells her she will never be free. The play ends with her begging on the street, under threat of torture and death from the pimp and his associates. Suze is a citizen in Northern Ireland, yet her own country does not offer her protection – and if it did, she couldn't access it anyway. Her rights as a citizen have been abrogated and suspended because her identity as a drug addict and prostitute and homeless person means that she is not a credible witness. This characterization of the female characters raises questions about the accessibility of "universal" rights.

Silent Trade critiques the silence that surrounds human trafficking, and the ways in which that silence permits the practice to continue. In a study of feminist theatre published almost thirty years ago, Lizbeth Goodman pointed to the recurrence of sexual violence as a thematic concern in women's writing for the stage. Lizbeth Goodman's *Contemporary Feminist Theatre* briefly discusses the recurrence of this issue, noting that women's artistic practice returns to it quite insistently, experimenting with methods and strategies of representation (Goodman, 1993). The issue continues to be addressed in women's dramatic writing and theatre practice, in Northern Ireland and around the globe. In these two plays, premiering with the same director, the question of sexual violence is explored in very different contexts, but with urgency and in recognition of the need to speak, and open dialogue, that might raise public awareness and result in meaningful action. In these plays, both of Dotson's forms of silencing are in operation. The characters are silenced from above, by other characters who are present on stage and who hold more power and authority over them, or by unseen characters whose words are relayed and who make the rules. This silencing is itself a kind of violence. It is interpersonal, but it is also systemic, defined by Zizek as operating largely invisibly as "normality" or as "just the way things are."

These examples of theatre, written and staged by women artists, act to break silences about social issues that have been covered over and suppressed through processes of shaming, victim-blaming, and denial. *Silent Trade* raises awareness and understanding

of trafficked women and of the obstacles they face if they try to escape or seek justice. *The Shedding of Skin* breaks the silence about the role of sexual violence during the conflict to harass particular communities, to police women's sexuality, and to suppress dissent. Resisting the imperatives of silence in this context offers empowerment, and also means liberating the voices of the people in the community, including the women, to raise challenges and to advocate for themselves and their community. These plays challenge the neoliberal version of Northern Ireland, drawing critical attention to the ways in which is it not just like anywhere else in the UK or Ireland. The work makes the differences visible and audible, performing the issues in a public space as a democratic action, as a critical and agonistic response to the dominant hegemony, seeking to force recognition of problems and solutions.

Notes

1 Although the term "Troubles" is used in journalism, scholarly writings, and dramatic representations of Northern Ireland, I will normally use the term "conflict" in this essay. The conflict is a minor but complicated one, broadly involving two opposing sections of the population: the Protestant population which is generally loyal to Britain and wishes to maintain Northern Ireland's place in the UK, and the Catholic population which generally identifies with Ireland and Irish culture. The conflict grew out of sectarian state institutions and structures which denied civil rights to the Catholic population. The conflict is notable partly because of its geographical location in Western Europe, in a disputed region between two wealthy states (the UK and the Republic of Ireland).

2 This part of the play is adapted from testimonies including the experience that Anne Walker recounts in the Theatre of Witness production *I Once Knew a Girl*. Walker, who was in the IRA, describes her commanding officer forcing himself upon her when they were in a safe house. She is one of very few former combatants who have spoken openly about this kind of experience.

3 Spivak is speaking of groups who are "the lowest strata of the urban sub-proletariat" and whose "capacity to speak and be heard" is systematically undermined by the state. This is not, of course, true of women as a class, to the same extent; but aspects of this kind of violence are often visible in rape trials and other situations when high-status individuals are accused of gender-based violence. Dotson proposes here a more general application of the term "epistemic violence" to consider the various practices by when the less powerful in any society may be silenced or rendered inaudible.

Works Cited

Anyadike-Danes, Ngozi, Megan Reynolds, Cherie Armour, Susan Lagdon. *Seen and Heard: Unwanted and non-consensual sexual experiences reported by university students in Northern Ireland*. University of Ulster, 2022.

Belville, Maria, Sara Dybris McQuaid. "Speaking of Silence: Comments from an Irish Studies Perspective". *Nordic Irish Studies* Vol. 11, No. 2, 2012, pp. 1-20. Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/41702633

Boland, Eavan. "The Woman Poet in a National Tradition." Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review, vol. 76, no. 302, 1987, pp. 148–58.

Brown, Wendy. "Finding the Man in the State." *Feminist Studies* Vol 18, No. 1, Spring 1992, pp.7-34.

Cafolla, Vittoria. *The Shedding of Skin*. Unpublished play text, ©Vittoria Cafolla 2021.

Coupe, Alexander. ""I'm Just a Pebble in the Pond": Exploring the Lived Legacies of Art for Reconciliation." *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, vol. 27, no. 3, 3 July 2022, pp. 366–385.

Dotson, Kristie. "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing." *Hypatia*, Spring 2011, Vol 26 No 2, pp.236-257.

Enloe, Cynthia. *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990.

Goodman, Lizbeth. *Contemporary Feminist Theatres*. London & New York: Routledge, 1993.

Jenkinson, Rosemary. *Silent Trade*. Dublin: Arlen House, 2023.

Loughran, Christina. "Armagh and Feminist Strategy: Campaigns around Republican Women Prisoners in Armagh Jail." *Feminist Review*, Summer 1986, No. 23, pp.59-79.

Mairs, Jolene. "Unseen Women: Stories for Armagh Gaol" (Film). Available online at https://vimeo.com/57889260 and at https://ansionnachfionn.com/2018/02/19/unseen-women-stories-from-armagh-gaol/. Last accessed 01/07/2023.

McKittrick, David, and David McVea. *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland*. Chicago, New Amsterdam Books, 2012.

Mouffe, Chantal. "Art and Democracy." *Open*, no. 14: Art as a Public Issue, 2008, pp.6-13.

Nagel, Joane. "Masculinity and nationalism: gender and sexuality in the making of nations." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21:2, 1998, pp.242-269,

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1998. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, eds. P. Williams and L. Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 66-111.

Swaine, Aisling. "Resurfacing Gender: A Typology of Conflict-Related Violence Against Women for the Northern Ireland Troubles." *Violence Against Women*, 2023; Vol. 29 (6-7): pp. 1391-1418.

Weinstein, Laura. "The Significance of the Armagh Dirty Protest." *Éire/Ireland* 41.3 & 4, 2007, pp.11-41.