

Landslide from Ben Bulbin: Mountain Activism and the Irish Abortion

Referendum

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Since 'nature' is saturated with ideologies that define women in terms of bodily reproductive capacities and maternal roles, women's challenges to the 'nature' of reproduction are hardly coincidental.

Stacy Alaimo (2000: 128)

On Thursday 17 May 2018, in the days leading up to the Republic of Ireland's abortion referendum, activists from an organization called Sligo for Life erected a 100-metre-tall 'NO' sign made of plastic sheeting high on Ben Bulbin in the Dartry Mountains.{{note}}¹ Interviewed on Ocean FM radio, activist Tommy Banks claimed that the sign was 'a cry from the mountain to save Ireland's babies because no-one is listening' (Banks 2018). Banks went on to say that in addition to the 'men of all ages' who had climbed the mountain to erect the sign, there were 'women as well, down there, getting ready tea and sandwiches', helping out (Banks 2018). People on both sides of the divisive campaign were provoked and infuriated by what they saw. Over a 24-hour period, reactions played out in the temporary performance space of social media (Lonergan 2015) as a spontaneous, improvised performance of satirical images and comments, circulated predominantly on Twitter and Instagram. This performance featured players including locals living within range of the mountain, others across Ireland, Irish citizens abroad -- myself included -- and tourists familiar with Ben Bulbin, in a temporary community of people all variously familiar with the flat-topped mountain: a flat summit shaped like a jaw, a jaw that might just bite, might just speak back.

[[figure1]]

Some argued that no one had the right to politicize Nature (although others were quick to point out that a 'Brits Out' sign had decorated Ben Bulbin's mountainside in the 1980s). Some more, playfully riffing on the notion of thinking like a politically minded mountain, proposed that Ben Bulbin itself would vehemently disagree with the 'no' vote and would advocate for 'yes'. Others conceded that while the poet

William Butler Yeats' masculine version of the mountain might have balked at women's bodily autonomy and reproductive rights, there could be no doubt that mythical Queen Medb, whose resting cairn at Knocknarea looks north to Ben Bulbin, would surely have been furious to see a 'no' stance imposed upon the landscape. A few self-assured keepers of common sense bluntly pointed out that Ben Bulbin was a mountain; and therefore that it wasn't 'thinking' anything.

Many were united in concern at what they saw as an act of cultural and environmental vandalism on the mountainside, and appalled by the assault on the mountain's unique ecology: in particular, how would the plastic signage impact negatively upon the fringed sandwort -- the only alpine plant known to have survived the ice age that ended in Ireland thousands of years ago -- that resides on the high north-facing slopes? Furthermore, the despoliation of an important landmark on the widely publicized Wild Atlantic Way could be bad for business: it would surely affront tourists and beauty-seekers just as the summer season was beginning.

On Twitter, the illustrator and cartoonist Annie West instigated a series of satirical memes, superimposing a range of song lyrics, comedic responses and political statements onto the image of the sign on the mountain. West's images instigated additional memes from others who circulated them widely online.

[[figure2]]

Further fuelling the satire came responses from authorities that infuriated and delighted those already engaged performers. Sligo County Council acknowledged complaints from concerned members of the public but washed their hands of any involvement or intervention, issuing a statement to say that the council had no 'role in this matter' because the land upon which the sign had been erected was 'commonage' (Sligo County Council 2018). The National Parks and Wildlife Service, however, requested the sign's removal, citing conservation grounds, venturing just beyond the bounds of expertise as custodians of biodiversity with an appeal to human affection for the iconic mountain:

The insinuation of alien materials such as this onto a special area of conservation is insensitive to its conservation status and incompatible with the habitat.

The owners should procure its immediate removal so that Ben Bulbin is returned undamaged to its natural and beloved state. (NPWS 2018)

In the spirit of Archiving the 8th (2018), then, my ecofeminist scramble through the limestone and mudstone slopes of Ben Bulbin proposes that at a crucial moment during high-stakes campaigning the performativity of the protest and its aftermath came to stand in for a material and metaphorical peak in what was subsequently widely pronounced as a 'landslide' victory for the 'yes' campaign when the referendum outcome was announced on 26 May. My suggestion is that the initial performance on the mountain and its mediatized extension signalled an affective juncture in campaigning that belonged on but also went far beyond Ben Bulbin's actual summit, contesting the gendered mountain space in the process. Despite predictions that the voting margin would be tight either way, the final count was 66.4 per cent: yes to 33.6 per cent: no. It was hard not to hear the term 'landslide' without imagining the sign on Ben Bulbin's mountainside just days earlier. ^[note]²

Landslides can occur suddenly or they can be the result of prolonged processes of weathering and erosion: human and non-human activities cause landslides.

Whether he intended it or not, Banks' initial choice of words attesting to the mountain's desperate 'cry' to save the unborn children of Ireland echoes the American conservationist Leopold's famous essay on 'Thinking Like A Mountain' (1968). Leopold's essay begins with a wolf's 'outburst of wild defiant sorrow' (129). Although he is out hunting deer with a group of men, the mountain's 'cry' eventually leads Leopold towards greater ecological awareness and a better appreciation of interdependence. Any Leopoldian allusions in Sligo for Life's 'NO' sign and the conversation it instigated, however, were rhetorical more than they were ecological. To think like Ben Bulbin was to variously cast the mountain as an actor for fossilized ideological, political, patriarchal and anthropocentric stances. To work backwards through the list, the mountain was personified as human with human thoughts. The

mountain was perceived as supporting masculinist structures that oppress women. Accordingly, it was perceived as having political leanings that supported the anti-choice campaign, aligning itself with a regressive, conservative and right-wing ideology. Inasmuch as they might be perceived as attuned with Leopold's ecology (the only woman present in 'Thinking Like A Mountain' is the mother wolf, who is shot dead) Sligo for Life's sign and stance exemplify what Stacy Alaimo summarizes as the essentialist nature that 'reduces ... protagonists to breeding bodies' (2000: 109), aligning women with nature and subordinating both. Alaimo argues instead for a feminist approach to ecology that might 'contend with the nature that has been waged against women' in seeking to 'recast' nature as 'feminist space' (1).

Sligo for Life's activism therefore epitomizes some of the most time-worn tropes around gender and nature. Historically, where a casting of Nature as feminine space has been deployed to restrict women's reproductive self-determination as 'unnatural', the initial work of the 'NO' sign was to perform these persistent narratives of virile and ableist masculine adventure in the mountains, where women are equated with virgin nature, objects and spaces of conquest and subjugation. The 'NO' sign on the mountain also relied heavily on ideological constructions of what Alaimo identifies as 'nature that constitutes women's bodies as reproductive' (116). Ben Bulben came to stand in for a 'natural' signifier chastening 'unnatural' women for seeking reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. The gendered domestic space of the kitchen came to the mountain, sustaining the climbers with tea and sandwiches as they erected -- another excruciatingly clichéd masculinist metaphor -- a giant plastic sign, compounding the intersection between damaging patriarchy and environmental disregard.

The satirical online responses to the protest, however, attempted to 'recast' nature as feminist space, such as that for which Alaimo advocates. They did so by virtually traversing the binaries of physical and imaginary, material and virtual, masculine and feminine on the mountain. Affectively, the events on and around Ben Bulben were significant because emotions were intensified and the stakes were so high at this late point in the campaign. For 'no' activists, such as those who climbed the mountain in the first place, and for 'yes' activists who responded online, a crisis peaked in the Ben Bulben performance: peak panic (for whom?); peak desperation

(for whom?); peak death throes of residual ideology in crisis (that most consoling of hopes). The 'NO' sign appeared both a desperate action, a last-ditch attempt to enlist the mountain for the pro-life cause because 'no one was listening' and an impassioned flag-planting that appropriated the metaphors of the mountainside while literally adorning it in plastic, because it was so confident in its moral authority.

From a computer in Exeter, England, I listened to the interview with Banks, clammy with rage at first, then panicked about what the outcome of the referendum might be. I had been working on performance, abortion and the Irish Sea for some time when the referendum was announced. Queasily pregnant and fairly incapacitated at the time of the Ben Bulbin protest, I had spent weeks glued to and overwhelmed by the In Her Shoes (2018) stories online of Irish women forced for decades to travel for abortions. Each piece of testimony was hard to read: the accumulated exhaustion of years of friends, family, allies and pregnant people I know and had never met denied the healthcare they needed at home. I had grown ashamed of my own paralysis in the final weeks of campaigning -- not so much activist as personal burnout. The 'NO' sign on Ben Bulbin reactivated and renewed rage. Alone, I yelled at Banks on the computer and then, upon logging in to Twitter, each subsequent humorous, witty or altered image of the 'NO' sign or creatively conceived response took the edge off the panic. ^[note]3

I mention my own response here because of the affective shift that was instigated by the Ben Bulbin episode. The performance space of social media hosted collective resistance through affective satire that accompanied the escalating intensity of campaigning as the referendum date approached, a somewhere to channel performances of panic that arose upon, around and with the mountain. Not unusually, satire tended wounds -- the kind of emergency care that doesn't fix anything -- as many, drained and unnerved, held their breath.

Uniquely, however, the durational performance that encompassed climbing, summit, descent, domestic support from base camp, Banks' words, photographs, comments, statements, images and the ultimate removal of the sign were layered with strata of materials and metaphors, some layers sedimenting and others contesting dominant political mountain meanings. By reasserting Ben Bulbin's apparently immovable

historical, cultural and ecological significance, the responding community ultimately temporarily communicated the mountainside as an unstable and precipitous -- if not entirely feminist -- space. On the morning of Friday 18 May 2018, all that was left of the sign were scraps of plastic: litter. And, as summer 2018 heated up #BenBulben returned to tourist images of the mountain.

Notes

1 The referendum offered a choice on whether to keep or repeal the 8th amendment of the constitution in the Republic of Ireland, which gives equal right to life to the mother and the unborn child.

2 All major newspapers referred to the results of the referendum as a landslide, including The Irish Times, The Irish Mirror and The Independent.

3 Retrospectively, relistening to Banks' interview in the wake of the referendum outcome, there was something uncomfortable about hearing rural Irish masculinity ridiculed from the UK. Some reporting on the powerful 'Home to Vote' movement -- where Irish citizens abroad travelled back to Ireland to vote 'yes' so that others wouldn't be forced to travel -- was likewise uncomfortable from the UK (the quietly patronizing suggestion that backward Catholic Ireland needed its enlightened cosmopolitan emigrants to vote for fundamental women's rights), souring the feeling for those Irish people moved to return.

References

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Captions

Figure 1. Ben Bulben. Photograph: James Connolly.

Figure 2. Annie West. Ben Bulben meme.