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### Imelda Rocks the Boom Boom

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## **Imelda Rocks the Boom Boom:**

### **Retro Nostalgia, Imelda May and the Culture of Irish Austerity.**

“Throughout our history, literature, music and art have been a source of great strength, have helped us cope with adversity, have not only soothed the loss which they described so well but also opened the space for new possibilities of renewal and change and created joy. I hope the programme will encourage Irish people everywhere to engage with the valuable resource that is our culture, to look to our creative possibilities and to project our Irishness into the world in the positive way that has been the achievement of our artists and cultural workers.”

President Michael D. Higgins, *Glaoch: The President's Call* (2013).

‘(S)ociety has found new ways to tell itself its own history. Retro allows us to come to terms with the modern past’ (Guffey, 2006:9)

On St. Patrick's Day 2013 RTÉ broadcast a special programme from the Áras an Uachtaráin, showcasing Irish music and culture to audiences worldwide. *Glaoch: The President's Call* was designed as a means to honour the potential for Irish arts and cultural production in contributing towards a progressive and vibrant Irish public life. *Glaoch* was also an attempt to interpellate the Irish diaspora in a celebration of a shared cultural heritage and the global reach and impact of Irish arts, culture and creativity.

The broadcast featured various high-profile Irish artists, from playwright Tom Murphy and the late Séamus Heaney to contemporary musicians including Glen Hansard, Lisa Hannigan, Christy Moore, Róisín O, Iarla O Lionaird, Bono and Peadar O Riada. They were filmed in performance in the state rooms of Ireland's presidential home. In the accompanying backstage documentary (*Glaoch - The President's Call: Behind the Scenes* 2013) the artists wander through the rooms freely, engaging each other and the President in informal conversation.

One of the most obvious stars of the broadcast is Imelda May, the singer-songwriter from the Dublin Liberties who is accompanied by her parents, Madge and Tony Clabby. The extended Clabby family frequently attend May's public appearances and have consequently become familiar characters on Ireland's talk-show circuit. Un-phased by the opulent nature of their surroundings in the *Áras an Uachtaráin*, they pose for formal photographs with Michael D. Higgins and his wife, Sabina Coyne. It is not difficult to surmise that we are witness to the marriage between the two first families of Ireland in the post-Celtic-Tiger era. The frame is unerringly cosy, domestic, and ordinary. In an act of what resembles daughterly affection Imelda May takes the arm of the seemingly distracted President to check that he is coping with this invasion of his home. He is reassured. Everything is going to be all right.

This article seeks to understand the popularity and prevalence of Imelda May as a musician and cultural icon in Ireland and addresses her profile as representative of a cultural politics of new Irish femininity. Furthermore it suggests that May's celebrity is constructed through a series of 'nostalgic' narratives that serve to normalise Irish austerity as a cultural experience.

May's emerging fame coincides with the imposition of austerity in Ireland. She came to mainstream attention in 2008 following a performance on the BBC's *'Later...with Jools Holland'* programme (BBC2 2008) with her band. This included her then husband, Darryl Higham, the English rockabilly guitarist. Since this appearance May has become a key figure in the remaking of a form of a cultural Irishness, more resonant with the post-Tiger rhetoric of austerity and shared fiscal responsibility. Ireland's 'Queen of the Rockabilly Revival' (Sturges, 2010) is an integral part of a new post-Tiger Irish cultural and creative elite. In this sense this article argues that May embodies a form of 'disruptive performativity' (Bramall, 2013) embodied in the aesthetic appropriation of austerity as an expression of feminine subjectivity – notably in specifically 'retro' form. This performativity problematizes, legitimates and mythologizes the structural inequalities and ideological constructions of Ireland's recent economic and cultural 'past'.

## **The Duchess of Dublin ....**

‘A strong voice, from a strong woman with a strong sense of style’ (Rigby, 2014: 28).

Conceived as a vehicle to centre the role of the arts and culture in the reconstruction of a post-Tiger global Irishness, *Glaoch* received an ambiguous reception in Ireland. Many online commentators concurred with an *Independent* article that referred to the broadcast as a metaphor for:

‘the creative bankruptcy of a nation, a sort of cultural parallel to the complacency and consensus’ of Irish politics in the wake of the global economic crisis ... peddling a Bord Fáilte-approved version of ... Irish identity’ (O’Hanlon, 2013).

Imelda May’s contribution to the broadcast, however, appeared to be immune to the oft-cited view that *Glaoch* offered a self-satisfied and safe image of contemporary Ireland’s cultural and creative spirit. Not only did her reputation as a popular and respected artist remain intact, but she emerged as a significant cultural ambassador for contemporary Ireland. This affirmed the importance of popular culture as resource in developing strategies to negotiate Ireland’s post-Celtic-Tiger future, ironically perhaps at a time when state investment in the arts and cultural sphere has been cut substantially.

That the rise and demise of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger economy have been paralleled by equally rapid shifts in the Irish social imaginary is widely documented. Coulter (2003) notes that as a consequence of the Tiger boom, older figurative constructions of Irishness have:

‘...been increasingly challenged and even displaced ... by a sequence of rather more complementary perspectives... ‘Irish’ comes to assume solely positive connotations. To be Irish is to be young, fun fashionable and above all perhaps,

belligerently secular. Irishness has, in other words, become shorthand for ‘cool’ (Coulter, 2003:2).

Within the academic literature on the relationships between culture, subjectivity and economy several commentators have foregrounded how there has been a specific gendering of the discourses surrounding self and nationhood. This has formed the basis of Diana Negra’s (2010; 2014) work on the repositioning of a ‘new Irishness’ within global consumer capitalism, noting that both the excesses of the boom period and the post-boom breakdown have been narrated in public and popular discourse through a series of essentializing and dichotomous gender tropes. The bases for the common-sense rhetorical sleights of hand that she identifies rest on notions of masculine hubris in the spheres of production and consumption bloated by grasping female acquisitiveness, gendered anomalies to centuries of authentic Irishness that recessionary culture demands be corrected in order to effect economic re-stabilisation. Similarly, Debbie Ging’s focus on new identity formations in contemporary Ireland has cited gender as one of the main frameworks through which socio-economic and cultural changes have been articulated in Ireland’s increasingly commercial landscape. However the mostly widely circulated discourses and images surrounding gender and post-Celtic Tiger Irishness have, according to Ging, served a highly lucrative, but reductive and re-polarizing effect (Ging, 2009:55-56).

Ging and Negra’s work is embedded within a notable interdisciplinary feminist literature on the emergence and effects of what is frequently referred to as an essentially ‘feminized’ recession and an associated ‘culture of austerity.’ Heather McRobie (2012) and Mimi Abramovitz (2012) have focused on the gendered nature and impacts of public spending cuts and the withdrawal of state social provision from vulnerable social groups. This apparent (re)feminization of austerity identifies women as either the victims of material cuts or presents them as the scapegoated, feckless ‘other’ of popular television genres such as RTÉ drama, *Love/Hate* (2010) or the ‘austerity porn’ of documentary and reality series like TV3’s *Darndale: The Edge of Town* (2014) and *Prison Families* (2014).

Since Irish women are still predominantly burdened with the guardianship of family values and morality it is then un-surprising that they are simultaneously encumbered with the *solutions* to austerity culture: this might include performing and disseminating the imperatives of hard work and efficiency, domestic thrift and frugality and a commitment to ‘sharing the pain’ of reactionary measures against public services by participating in ‘big society’ community volunteerism. This article argues that May’s particular version of a performative, ‘retro’ femininity oscillates between the traditional values of home, hearth and community and the creative, individualistic ‘cool’ of the boom period, an uneasy alliance in which the postmodern historicity of her ‘retro’ persona simultaneously locates her as revivalist of conservative gendered identities and a (post) feminist revisionist.

This problematic is of interest to wider feminist debates about the gendered nature of ‘retro’ culture, much of which has concerned itself with the extent to which individual investments, performances and acts of consumption invite subject positions that are symptomatic of a regressive femininity (McRobbie 2008). Moreover, some feminist contributions have sought to link this gendered address to the wider ‘crisis’ of women’s positioning within the ‘austerity’ of the current economic circumstances (Abramovitz, 2012; Jensen, 2012). Others, on the other hand, point to ways in which particular historical subjectivities that engage with austerity culture facilitate radical re-imaginings of the ways in which society orientates itself to consumption, sustainability and collective responsibility (Brammell, 2011, 2012 2013, 2015).

### **Retro Femininity as Disruptive Performance**

‘You won’t miss Imelda May ... She’s the one with the ruby-red lips, the peroxide-streaked pin curl set against the deepest mahogany hair and the bone-white skin that looks like it may never have seen the sun. Then there’s her wardrobe – all figure-hugging leopard prints, monochrome stripes and red leather corsetry creating an aesthetic that is part Fifties prom queen, part saucy burlesque star’. (Sturges,

2010b).

Embedded in the visceral ebbs and flows of popular culture, Elizabeth Guffey suggests a new “‘freelance’ historian’ has emerged whose ‘memorialization of the recent past emerges not through traditional historical research but through the identification and acquisition of objects from the recent past, as well as the replication of its images and styles (Guffey 2006:26). For an Irish audience living in the midst of protracted social and economic uncertainty, Imelda May might be considered such an historian. May’s popular appeal lies in her perceived ability to bridge a cultural gap between the traditionalism of auld Dublin, the aspirational Tiger years and the culturally chaotic present of Ireland’s ‘new’ austerity through what Rebecca Bramall refers to as a progressive, if ‘disruptively performative,’ retro-feminine identity (Bramall, 2013: 128-9). Her retro femininity embodies a process whereby the hegemonic centres of Irish cultural memory are problematized and reconstituted in complementary yet contradictory ways.

An idealised, retro historicity has become a visible aspect of Ireland’s inner-city culture-scapes since the mid-2000s. Based on the hyper-authentic signs and signifiers of mid-twentieth century Americana, vintage boutiques, old-style tattoo parlours, tiki bars, barber shops and burger joints evoke a smart urban ‘cool’ that stands in confident, curled-lipped opposition to the corporate city centres that were reshaped to the requirements of global commerce during the Celtic Tiger years. In Dublin a thriving and recognizably retro scene is located primarily around various sites of the western inner-city’s cultural quarters - Dame Street, Temple Bar, Smithfield and the Liberties-Christchurch area, evident in the popularity of Rockin’ Roots pop-up club nights, music performances, and the lindy-hop and tea dance classes that attest to the convergence of rockabilly and West Coast swing. Dublin City Council has been quick to consciously assimilate and promote this apparent ‘retroization’ of the urban culture-scape as part of its urban regeneration and community renewal programme, teaming up with Fáilte Ireland and local development organisations since 2014 to create various flagship cultural events such as the annual Dame District ‘*Quiffs and Riffs*’ *Dublin Rock ‘n’ Roll Festival* (2015) that is held during the August Bank Holiday.

There is, however, more to retro than the often ‘excessive and pantomime display’ (Bramall, 2013: 128) of ‘being vintage’ signified by quiffs, music, hot-rods and Betty Page bangs. Elizabeth Guffey (2006) suggests that retro is a mode of interrogating, re-appropriating and re-presenting hegemonic claims to knowledge. Far from being a simple, sentimentalised longing for a bygone era, Guffey argues that ‘retro does not look backwards in order to dignify or elevate contemporary society’ (Guffey, 2006: 21), but uses the practices and materiality of popular culture’s ‘communal memory’ as a mode of critical storytelling to challenge official forms of historicity and memorialization. Culturally self-reflexive and historically detached, retro de-mythologizes the ‘old’ and offers alternative ways of being new (Guffey, 2006: 11), albeit in highly aestheticized ways. Imelda May’s iconic look, combined with her status as a contemporary musician, her media persona and her recently acquired role as popular cultural ambassador to the Irish diaspora, places her in an interesting position as a cultural interlocutor who speaks to the implicit tensions at the heart of Irish austerity - and Irishness more broadly - between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ conceptions and modes of Irish femininity. This article suggests that May’s articulation of her experiences and foregrounding of an identity predicated primarily on old-fashioned family values and a romanticised working-class Catholicism may serve to re-articulate popular resistance to Ireland’s current austerity culture as a (de)politicised call for a stoic collectivism that privileges a problematic response to gender roles and which by extension may legitimate the widening structural inequalities evident within the post-boom Irish economy.

### **Historicity as her story – Imelda and ‘communal meaning’**

Imelda May’s ‘disruptive performance’ constructs a narrative that foregrounds her historically-grounded autobiography as a mode of communal meaning. In this sense May’s retro femininity embodies a historicity that, Freeman (2010) suggests not only demythologizes the historical but embeds it in the performed subjectivity itself. This idea of ‘talking back to history’ (Freeman, 2010: xxi) is a constitutive element of the



disruptive nature of retro femininity (Bramall, 2013). Quite literally, Imelda May becomes *the* story - the narrative through which Ireland's contested recent past and contentious present are reconfigured.

As a performer who grew up in the 'old Dublin' working class, inner-city parish of the Liberties Imelda May seems a natural interlocutor between traditional and new Irish cultural identities, not least because of her upbringing within a large, culturally-engaged family who have demonstrated across the generations a depth of knowledge and technical skills within a wide repertoire of musical forms. Few media interviews with Imelda May fail to foreground her parents' passion for music and dance, her mother's founding of a community musical theatre group, her sisters' musical talent and her brother Fintan's role in introducing Imelda to early rock 'n' roll, pop and psychobilly. As an early interview for RTÉ suggests, music is in her blood, her talent nurtured within 'a traditional artisan dwelling ... a musical household, as Imelda explains "*We had a piano, but we didn't have a phone!*" (O'Callaghan, 2010). Other interviews remind us of the family's encouragement of May's proficiency in traditional Irish music; she told *Elmore* online magazine that her sister Maria taught her to play guitar and she learned to play the bodhrán from old traditional musicians, firstly in a pub in the west of Ireland and later by playing along in informal sessions back in Dublin with her brother, Brendan's traditional band (May, 2010). The Clabby family are thus established as trustworthy curators of a wide-ranging but culturally relevant, roots-based musical heritage that oscillates between the folkist, the marginal and the mainstream. Indeed, despite being regularly referred to as the 'Queen of Rockabilly' in the popular and musical press May continually refutes the label of revivalist, vociferously drawing attention to her eclectic musical heritage, as in this interview for *Popmatters*:

'I don't feel like I'm a revivalist. I don't think the music that I do is nostalgic in any way ... I want to bring it slap-bang up to today ... I'm not pure rockabilly but a mix with blues and jazz and a punk vibe' (May, 2011).

May frequently reiterates a list of prestigious musical heroes which includes Elvis, Gene

Vincent, Eddie Cochran, Luke Kelly and, most importantly, Wanda Jackson and Billie Holiday) Vicar Street 2016), leading her to be pronounced in the diaspora journal, *Irish Central* as ‘the latest “true Dublin” Irish musician to express an affinity with traditionally ‘Black music qualities that resonate to the deep note of native forms’ (Keane, 2010).

Her legitimacy as a musician is also clearly underpinned by a cultural logic that privileges craftsmanship and the labour of the hard-working musician, rather than the highly mediated and superficial immediacy of celebrity. Her publicity material and media coverage frequently detail the well-worn trajectory of the Liberties girl’s slow rise to a respected international artist via various hard-fought for and humbling jobs. Her first television performance was at ten years old when she sung on RTÉ’s *The Late Late Toy Show* (1986) as a member of her mother’s Liberties Music and Drama Group. At fourteen she recorded an advertising jingle, ‘Betcha never put your finger on a crunchier crumb’ for Findus which she explained on Channel 4’s *The Graham Norton Show* (2011) earned her the nickname of ‘The Fish Fingers Girl’. Other interviews have revealed that she was once barred from her own gig at Dublin’s *Bruxelles* venue for being an underage musician (Vicar Street, 2016) and told of her various jobs earning money as a nightclub cloakroom girl (Moreton 2014), cleaning houses (Sturges 2010a) and performing in a burlesque venue where a spark from an angle-grinder applied to another performer’s crotch burned her throat (Wilde, 2015).

On the one hand May’s musical knowledge and prowess foregrounds a heritage of shared musical genealogies. Her craft, learned and perfected within the settings of family and community, is saturated in both traditional Irish and mid-century American musical sounds and referents yet attuned to contemporary developments in roots-based and popular music. She appears therefore to embody the qualities of the inherently talented and innovative Irish cultural ambassadors championed at the 2011 Global Irish Economic Forum as the ‘heroes’ of the future in their ability to inscribe this heritage in Ireland’s recovery within the global economy (DFAT, 2011).

On the other hand May's particular historicity seems to stand in stark contrast to the modern, cool, polished sound and iconography of Celtic Tiger Ireland as exemplified by globally successful bands such as The Corrs (Negra, 2010) who trade on a different type of feminine-familial history and performance. Diane Negra's analysis of The Corrs' successful single, '*So Young*', refers to the song's emphasis on youth (the preoccupation of the Celtic Tiger) living in the moment and following every desire, as a 'productivity anthem under globalisation'. With its 'bland harmonies supplemented by traditional Irish music flourishes' complemented by a video drenched in a muted blue tones and shot in the 'empty geography' of Chicago's Federal Central Plaza complex, the song for Negra is 'expressive of the cool palette of the New Irishness'. It is an endorsement of the rampant corporatization and 'standardization of the symbolic economy of Irishness in a neo-liberal market place' that was encouraged during the boom years (Negra, 2010: 837-8).

As Connell and Gibson remind us, 'there is every reason to search for genuine emotion and subversiveness in music,... bound up in emotional worlds it is always psychological as well as geographical' (Connell & Gibson, 2003:274). In contrast to the seemingly effortless but soulless corporate pop provided of bands like The Corrs, Imelda May offers a more visceral and authentic sound and mode of performance, her respect for and fidelity to an eclectic Irish- American folk and roots-based heritage reflected in the style and thematic content of her own repertoire. Her strong vocal delivery appears untrained in its stripped-down, raw immediacy. The verisimilitude to the emotive rhythms of mid-century rock 'n' roll, jazz, soul and blues is central to her performance, more natural and apparently spontaneous than the micro-managed choreography that typifies more 'mainstream' acts. May's foregrounding of an emotional depth, in preference to a more rational corporate musicality, consciously accentuates the connection between audience, narrative and the familial as communal meaning:

'(I)t doesn't matter if you're not a fabulous singer but you have to close your eyes and put your heart and soul into it. My mother used to tell me, "You're telling a story, you have to speak the music."' (May, 2011).

This inter-connectedness foregrounds May's symbolic role as an 'unofficial historian,' both rightful inheritor and potential curator of Ireland's lyrical and folk-cultural traditions that give expression to the shared histories of marginality, popular resilience and resistance masked beneath the glossy veneer of the more corporate globalizing values promoted by many Irish artists of the Celtic Tiger years. Nevertheless May remains an ambiguous cultural icon of Ireland's post-recession austerity, one whose repertoire and public persona have been mobilized discursively and ideologically in the desire to rework the recent past through the production of a communal memory that appears to make manageable a collective response to the present.

### **Return of the Daughter of the Diaspora**

'Nobel- winning economist Joseph Stiglitz has described the Irish ability to suck up pain associated with austerity as "astonishing"' (O'Hara, 2013).

The closing scene of *Glauch: The President's Call* (2013) was the performance of a bittersweet folk-ballad, *Kentish Town Waltz* (2010), written and sung by Imelda May, accompanied only by her husband, Darryl Higham, on acoustic guitar. The song narrates an experience which resonates deeply within the Irish collective consciousness and to a folk music tradition, that of the isolation and poverty experienced by recent generations of Irish migrants forced to emigrate in order to seek opportunities in life. It recounts a young couple's attempts to establish themselves as first generation London-Irish, the difficulties of living above 'the Offy' and the shame of hiding from the bailiffs when they can't pay their bills.

Structurally and lyrically '*Kentish Town Waltz*' revisits an experience that had been consigned to Ireland past, or so it was assumed during the Celtic Tiger when Ireland went through a period of unprecedented net-migration. A place to be, rather than leave, Ireland was literally leaving its past behind and entering a new phase of historical experience (Barry and Conroy, 2013), one already marked for future commemoration as a skyward-reaching economy by the unveiling of the world's tallest sculpture, Dublin's Millennial

Spire in 2002. However, the impact of global recession and the imposition of the Troika, has in effect seen the return to the pre-Tiger experience of emigration as a central feature of Irish economic and cultural experience, particularly for young Irish men and women. Between 2006 and 2012 emigration rose from 36,000 to 87,000 per annum, 46% being Irish nationals. By far the highest grouping of those leaving at more than 70% are young people in their twenties (CSO figures, cited in Glynn, Kelly and MacÉinrí, 2013:29,34).

When Shane MacGowan and Kirsty MacCall sung *Fairytale of New York* (1987) they gave expression to ‘the discourses ... or social imaginaries’ of the emigrant experience that are what Kieran Keohane (1990:71) argues are likely to be ‘extra-fragmented, contradictory and incoherent’. In contrast *Kentish Town Waltz* is more easily read as a semi-autobiographical love song sung by May to Higham, one that looks back fondly to the 1990s and the early years of their relationship when May moved to London to live with her future husband and to try to make her career in the music business. In the *Glaoch* broadcast May and Higham are framed in a series of close, symmetrical two-shots which underscore a narrative celebrating the triumph of love, labour and ‘pulling together.’ In this respect the song acts as a rousing call to the Irish diaspora of the future, the current generation of young Irish people on the cusp of emigrating to find work. *Kentish Town Waltz* re-interprets the lived realities of forced geographical mobility and economic deprivation as a sentimentalised celebration of national stoicism, providing Ireland with its very own potential fairytale for the austerity era. Speaking to *Metro* magazine, Imelda May stressed that although the ballad ‘might tie in with even more people now there’s been a recession,’ it is not only ‘about struggling but also having a great time if you stick together’ (May, 2010). When May subsequently announced her separation from Higham in mid-2015 she was swift to anticipate and dispel press speculation about the breakdown of their relationship that might threaten this narrative of close solidarity by reassuring her fans and the nation that ‘no matter what you hear and read my husband and I have the deepest love and respect for each other and ... We are lucky to both have such amazing family and friends’ (May, 2015).

Three months previously Imelda May had been chosen to lead Ireland and the Irish

diaspora into the *Year of The Gathering* by singing *Auld Lang Syne* at the live New Year's Eve Countdown to 2013 concert in Dublin's College Green. Speaking to [RTÉ](#)'s Miriam O'Callaghan prior to her midnight performance May (2012) stressed that, 'I do miss Dublin. I love the people. I love the banter ... the dry wit. But I don't think I would have done well had I not moved over to England ... It kind of kicked me up the bum and I had to work harder ... it made me have to prove (myself) and then when I came home it was great to be home again'. Here, as in her rendition of *Kentish Town Waltz*, the process of looking backwards is that of Janus-faced nostalgia from the perspective of the successful migrant who draws our attention towards what they have now become. Irish emigration is re-framed as a romantic adventure, a fantasy whereby individual hard work community spirit, and a stoic acceptance of the 'realities' of Irish austerity become sources of power, privilege and prestige.

### **Neo Liberal Recession, Rockin' Recovery**

May's 'disruptive performance' has been appropriated for and by apparently contestant ideological discourses within debates on Irish austerity. A core theme has been the ways in which May's 'working class-ness' simultaneously affirms a rhetorical acquiescence to, and resistance against austerity. May has been aligned with popular anti-austerity protests within Ireland. At the same time she has been adopted as an exemplar of 'austere' lifestyles and the impetus towards personal thrift and sustainable consumption, whether performing at the ostensibly DiY, community-orientated Virginia Pumpkin Fest (2010) in County Cavan or appearing as the celebrity face of the Down Syndrome Centre's 'Buy My Dress' recycling for charity campaign (Down Syndrome Centre, 2015).

May seemingly exemplifies what Brammell (2012) identifies as the conflicting but complementary organising principles of austerity discourse: rejection of the ideology of austerity as an approach to fiscal policy, while simultaneously embracing it as a cultural aesthetic and lifestyle, consciously promoting modes of consumption that accentuate the values of frugality and sustainability. May is known for her fundraising work for Irish Catholic charities Trócaire and St Vincent De Paul and through her support for the SVP

and Inner City Helping Homeless collaboration with the Irish music industry project, *Music to Help Homeless People Project* (Music Man in Hat, 2015). She is also ambassador for children's charity, *Make A Wish Ireland* which involved her releasing a charity single through i-tunes in 2011 (*Make a Wish Ireland* 2015). Beyond her charity work May has used her status to promote grassroots social movements including the Anti-Austerity Alliance (2014) and Irish Council Against Blood Sports and National Animal Rights Association (NARA) lobbying activities against Irish fur farming (McNamara 2014).

Although May might reasonably be understood as aligning herself with grassroots critiques of the Irish government's handling of the economic recession her actual position has been quite ambiguous. May has spoken openly of her avoidance of 'politics', attributing the economic crisis to individual greed and excessive spending, placing the solution to social and economic recovery firmly in the hands of the family and community re-distribution of wealth. Appearing on *The Late Late Show* in December 2014 she spoke to host Ryan Tubridy at length of the need for every person to make a community contribution, making clear that 'we all buy loads of things we don't need, don't we' while Tubridy invited her father, Tony Clabby, to read out a self-penned poem on the personal shame of Irish people living life at a fast pace while ignoring those less fortunate (*Late Late Show*, 2014).

The paradox of this humanitarian address is that the a-political faith in the 'progressive, redemptive forces of feeling, love, religion and fidelity to 'right' & to 'truth' (Reynolds, 2007: 28) offers no actual critique of the hegemonic institutional structures, economic and social policies that lay the foundation for social inequality in austerity Ireland. May is a reminder of Jensen's point that within post-recession societies we have become entrenched within a 'culturalization of poverty' which continually shifts emphasis from existing structural inequalities towards personal 'thrift' or fecklessness (Jensen 2012: 5). Austerity discourses have become increasingly preoccupied with a politics of lifestyle that mythologizes aggressive cuts to public provision and declining opportunities in the labour market as 'virtuous domestic spending'. Jensen concludes that, the objectives of

austerity 'align neatly with those of neo-liberalism: to discipline labour, to reduce the role of the state and to redistribute income, wealth and power from labour and capital,' a form of economic re-distribution organised primarily around the reinforcement of traditional family values, the myth of unified community and the privatisation of unpaid care within the home (Jensen, 2012: 22).

In May 2012 Imelda May was made the face of the Irish League of Credit Unions' national marketing campaign. She appeared in two major advertising campaigns launched on Irish television, both of which focused on the ICLU's 'commitment to co-operation and ... to community' (ILCU, 2012). May was chosen as someone who 'has earned success the hard way ... living, dancing, singing proof for us all that hard work has its rewards'. Through May's 'retro femininity' as 'disruptive performance', the ILCU construct an imaginary alternative to the discredited top-down, state sanctioned global banking system. The advertising campaign is in effect an attempt to construct counter-hegemonic 'communal meanings' in which the myths of national renewal find their most concentrated and direct expression. May literally becomes the personification not only of the Credit Union's core values, but those of a nation as a whole: dependability underpinned by the self-reliance and mutual support of a down-to-earth 'family'.

In the first advert, the camera follows her into her local Credit Union branch. She is wearing her trademark pin curl and leopard-skin coat. The muted slap of a doghouse bass and snare drum count out a rockabilly beat within the extra-diegetic sound. Looking around May catches the eye of several other customers, all of whom bear the iconographic retro signifiers of modern rockabilly - the men in upturned jeans, bowling shirts, signature greased quiffs and long sideburns, the women ponytailed in pedal pushers, plaid shirts, polka dots and oversized hoop earrings. Credit Union passbook in hand, Imelda smiles in satisfaction that 'things are catching on' (ICLU Imelda May TV Ad 1, 2012) A similar scenario is re-enacted in the second TV advertisement. This time the backing track tempo is louder and more pronounced, the slap bass and snare accompanied by layers of extra-diegetic percussion overdubbed to the rhythm of items being used by the credit union customers: a baby's rattle being shaken, a teenage boy tapping out a text on his mobile phone, an older woman opening the zip on her holdall,



fingers tapping on a bank teller's keyboard. Imelda and the smart rockabilly teller smile in mutual recognition. Imelda's casual comment that, "It's busy today," receives the response, "Yeah it's rockin'" (ICLU Imelda May TV Ad 2, 2012).

May's retro performance lent the ICLU a mode of authenticity by which it could articulate its own performance as a form of 'disruptive performance', voicing a commitment to seek out community based alternatives to the socio-economic and cultural stagnation that austerity measures have imposed on the Irish people. However the television advertisements could be interpreted as reframing the potentially disruptive nature of retro as a regressive reality. In re-branding the Credit Union movement as an accessible, but modish club the ICLU reinforces the myth 'we're all in this together,' the myth of Irish unity in austerity. Communal meaning is recast as an overwhelmingly aesthetic response to the inequalities of Irish capital ownership and distribution.

### **The Trouble with Imelda: The Disruptive Complicity of Performance**

'Everybody adores Imelda May and it's not hard to work out why... fame hasn't altered her... May is a national icon' (Stacey, 2014).

'I'm just very glad to have a job' (May, 2012).

That Imelda May has achieved critical and popular success during the period of global economic recession, should not be ignored. Angela McRobbie (2008: 539) has been critical of the rise of modes of feminist critique that appear to 'suspend critical engagement with the wider political and economic conditions' that shape the cultural phenomena they seek to analyse,' so we would argue that the rise of May's rockabilly sound, retro aesthetic & performance can't adequately be analyzed if it is dislocated from the political, economic and social context in which it has become re-popularized. Following McRobbie, this article has explored how Imelda May's popularity is embedded in the zeitgeist of Irish austerity. Nevertheless, as Bramall reminds us, '(i)n the wake of

the financial crisis, some feminist commentators seem, by contrast, to have reverted to an equally problematic model of ideology critique in which the economic is believed to trump any other interpretative frame' (2013:121). The analysis has attempted to avoid presenting a reading of Imelda May performance as reductively economic.

Following Bramall's (2013:137) reminder that austerity is 'a complex and contested terrain of meaning and political struggle', the article has located May as a historicized interlocutor in the struggle over the restructuring of the Irish state, Irish capital and Irish cultural experience. By focusing on the ways in which Imelda May has been claimed by seemingly conflicting political and socio-cultural positions within the discourses of Irish austerity, we have argued that Imelda May's retro-feminine performance (Guffy, 2006) as a cultural ambassador for economic recovery offers a form of national catharsis whereby the memory of the failures of the Celtic Tiger is exorcised from communal memory and the continuation of socio-economic inequality is (re)mythologized through seemingly transformative communal meanings.

May's feminine performance is consistently located within notions of the ordinary and the exceptional. Emerging from an archetypally down-to-earth and close-knit blue-collar community, 'the Liberties Belle' has made good. Her success has been attributed to, rather than despite her humble origins, the result of a strong communal support system, an unwavering work ethic and ethos of 'pulling together'. This positioning of May as daughter, neighbour, sister and wife is extended to her wider gendered positioning as 'daughter of the nation' and reframed as a site of cultural aspiration and national pride. Beyond the scope of this article our research extends to more detailed investigations into the specifically gendered nature of Imelda May's performativity and into her ambassadorial role in promoting Irish creativity and enterprise. Our analysis here is limited to how May's grounding within a particular Dublin historicity is evoked and to what extent it challenges hegemonic bodies of meaning and knowledge over Ireland's recent past.

In conclusion this article argues that as a cultural text Imelda May evokes traces of an

older Irish popular memory of radical collective activism against limiting economic opportunities, while also speaking to the passive normalization of austerity as communal experience in a contemporary context. Following Guffey (2006) it is possible to interpret May's 'retro femininity' as a form of 'communal memory' that problematizes the dominant narratives of Ireland's recent socio-economic experience. However this article suggests that this problematization is only ever partial, in that May's 'disruptive performance' (Bramall, 2013) becomes the vehicle through which those same narratives are recast, reconstituted and represented. In Imelda May Irish society has found new ways to tell itself its own history – a means to come to terms with its modern past and re-imagine its post-Tiger future.

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