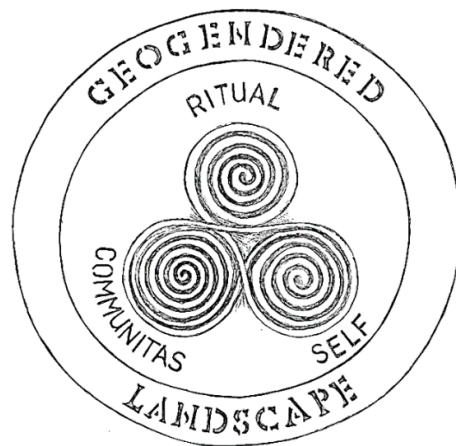


Awakening the Goddess Within:  
An Autoethnographic and Poetic Inquiry into Older  
Women's Ageing and Identity in Ireland



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## Abstract

Older women's lack of representation in the mediated culture of the western world has led to the social construction of the older woman as valueless in society. Normalising older women as invisible and worthless in this neoliberal hegemonic culture subsequently stories them, socio-culturally, as other in that society.

This study explores how older women in contemporary Ireland feel about their identity; and its timing is hugely significant. The rapidly changing nature of Irish society has evoked a polemic opportunity for a cataclysmic religious and cultural shift. Disillusionment with the Catholic Church, specifically its indoctrination and oppressive practices towards women, has led to resurgence, particularly amongst older women, in embracing the egalitarian ethos of the indigenous Celtic spirituality.

Framed in an intersectional third wave feminist approach, underpinned by autoethnography, and utilising poetic inquiry as a conduit to the unconscious; the design of this study was conceptualised over the course of several years, emerging from the process, product, and legacies of poetry workshops I facilitated with women of the third and fourth age in the community of Athlone, a midlands town in Ireland. Concurrently I became fifty and began to explore my own identity as an ageing woman through poetry, art-based mediums, and performances.

The study focused on three objectives:

1. Ageing: To explore older women's lived experiences of ageing in Ireland.
2. Identity: To examine how they felt about their identity as older women.
3. Ritual: To investigate older women's participation in rituals

The context of this study is a year-long journey through the rituals of the Celtic Festivals, at Uisneach, the sacred and mythological centre of Ireland. Within this liminal landscape, twenty-one women, including myself who are representative of third agers (50 to 65), reflected on our lived experiences as ageing women and how we view our sense of identity,

by journaling our feelings and reflections through our poetry and our co-constructed collaborative poetry.

A Heptagonal Methodological Model gathered the data through autoethnography; poetic inquiry; field notes; reflective journal; participant observation; narrative inquiry interviews; and the production of various art-based research artefacts.

Findings indicated that by Triskelic journeying through Geogendered landscape, a space was created, within which, a Communitas of Sisterhood organically formed. We, as older women, individually and collectively, negotiated and renegotiated our ageing and identity to access, embody, and perform our authentic identity. Consequently, through creative collaborative poetry and production of artefacts; our journey led to our reclamation of empowerment, authenticity, confidence and belonging. This Triskelic model offers a potential transferable framework for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, academics, and students to explore various dimensions of ageing and identity, and other social issues.

**Key Words:** (1) Older Women (2) Ageing (3) Identity (4) Autoethnography (5) Feminist Intersectionality (6) Poetic Inquiry (7) Ritual

## Statement of Originality

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed:

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## 1. Introduction to the Thesis

Whilst there exists a great deal of research on the social and cultural experiences ageing for women in Western contexts (Gullette, 1997; Cruikshank, 2009; Twigg and Martin, 2015; Jennings and Grist, 2017); from an Irish perspective, there is a paucity of research regarding women's voices of their lived experiences of ageing and identity. Harrington, Bielby and Bardo (2014) propose that 'we need new ways in which older women identify, are invited to grow old, and new ways in which older people, especially women, are represented (p.68).

In considering new ways of representing older women; Faulkner (2018) argues for the use of poetic inquiry as a feminist methodology. Illustrating her use of poetry as research method; Faulkner identifies how poetry as research offers a 'means of doing, showing, and teaching embodiment and reflexivity, a way to refuse the mind-body dialectic, a form of feminist ethnography, and a catalyst for social agitation and change,' (p.93). Elaborating on the potential of personal poetry to demonstrate lived experiences as research, Faulkner claims that:

the personal is poetry... Poetry of personal experience is vital. Poetry has the power to highlight slippery identity-negotiation processes and present more nuanced views of marginalized and stigmatized identities, to demonstrate embodied experience and to be social research and autoethnography, (p. 93).

In concurrence with Faulkner the concept of storytelling through the method of poetic inquiry is utilised as a feminist methodology in this study 'to crank up feminism' (2018, p. 85). See the methodology chapter of this thesis for more on this approach and its connection to the research project.

My study utilised an original line of inquiry at the ageing and cultural studies intersection to explore older women's lived experiences of ageing through participative ritual, poetic inquiry and autoethnography. Framed in a constructivist paradigm, the study was written from a feminist, intersectional, interpretive, cultural gerontological theoretical perspective; utilising a multiple qualitative research methods methodological model;

incorporating autoethnography, poetic inquiry, narrative inquiry interviews, participant observation, field notes, reflective journal, and the production of artefacts.

As facilitator and researcher, I was also a participant, journeying with the women on a yearlong celebration of the Celtic Festivals of seasonal rituals at the geographic, sacred, and liminal site of the Hill of Uisneach, (also known as the mythical 5<sup>th</sup> province of Míde). The fieldwork began on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017; when thirteen older women, including myself, participated in a celebration of Bealtaine, one of the Celtic Festivals of the Seasons; at the Royal Palace at Uisneach, the mythological and sacred centre of Ireland, in the County of Westmeath.

In the month prior to the start of our journey, I had interviewed twelve women with the question, 'How do you feel about your identity as an older woman?'. My aim was for twelve older women's voices to be heard at each festival. Over the course of the year long journey, other participants joined for the different festivals and were also interviewed. The final core participants of older women's voices totalled twenty-one.

At the time of the interviews, I provided each participant with a journal, asking them to reflect upon their answers through poetry, narratives, and reflections over the next year. Due to the creative nature of this project, participants indicated that they would not want to be made anonymous in the thesis and would like to be associated with their poetry (see Research Methods chapter for more on this). As an autoethnographer, I was part of the study, fulfilling Anderson's (2006, p. 2012) definition of my roles as 'a full member in the research group, visible as a member in the researcher's published text and committed to an analytic research agenda focusing on improving theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena,' (2006, p.378).

Participating in the Bealtaine celebration at Uisneach is hugely symbolic. In Irish mythology, the Sovereign Goddess of Ireland Ériu, whom Ireland (Éire) is named after, is honoured by the lighting of the Bealtaine Fire. When Uisneach became the seat of High Kings, the presence of the Goddess Ériu was so revered, that it became customary for the claimant to the throne to 'marry' Ériu. Thus, symbolising the role of land and nature as pivotal in Celtic

mythology. Access to the Otherworld is also more likely at the liminal time of Bealtaine. Access to the Otherworld at Uisneach is at the resting place of Ériu, beneath Ail na Mireann, a thirty-tonne fragmented limestone boulder, also known the Catstone, or The Stone of Divisions (symbolising the unification of the ancient five divisions of Ireland).

Participating in the rituals enabled us to explore our experiences of time, space, ritual, and place (May and Thrift, 2001); and in doing so, utilise these experiences to negotiate our identities as ageing women in contemporary Ireland. Journeying through the Celtic Festivals of the Seasons provided an opportunity for us as older women to come together in Sisterhood to discuss our lived experiences of ageing through our own stories.

As I examine in the Literature Review chapter of this thesis, stories of lived experience speak loudly when exploring the shifting landscape of ageing. Chapter 2 of this thesis is part 1 of the Literature Review which explores the literature concerning ageing and older women; Chapter 3 is part 2 of the Literature Review which explores identity; Chapter 4 is part 3 of the Literature Review which explores ritual; Chapter 5 is the research methods; Chapter 6 is the analysis; and Chapter 7 is the conclusion and recommendations for further research.

## 2. Literature Review: Ageing (Part 1)

### 2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review

The literature review is divided into three sections:

1. Ageing
2. Identity
3. Ritual

The first section reviews the literature concerning ageing and older women; the global narrative constituting older women and ageing; the mediated, cultural narrative of the invisibility of older women; theoretical perspectives of the feminist intersectional gerontological approach; and the lived experience of older women ageing in and with Ireland. This section evaluates the patriarchal oppression of women in Irish society, by a tridactic system of the Catholic Church; the Irish state; and the projection of a postcolonial nationhood. It reviews the literature relating to major cultural changes for women in Ireland; and explores the growing global and national demographic trend of the reigniting of Paganism as a conduit of spirituality for older women. Finally, this section focuses on migrated older Irish women, the diaspora struggle, and the fragmentation of leaving.

The second section examines theories of identity in relation to older women. It plots the social construction of women's identity from an Irish historical context; examining how older women make meaning of their identities in a contemporary context. It reviews the literature of body identity, interrogating concepts of the ageing female body and the postcolonial identity of older Irish women. Sisterhood; and the possibility of renegotiating older women's identity through exploration of the Goddess, and its interrelatedness; are examined through an ageing and identity lens.

The third section explores theories of ageing in time, landscape, and ritual in relation to the journey that we as older women, undertook in this study. With regards to time and older women; theoretical perspectives of ageing, temporality, time and transageing (Moglen, 2008) are examined. This section looks at the theoretical perspective of performing ageing through ritual; and reviews the posited literature of older women's embodiment of the Goddess through ritual.

It explores contested spaces in society for ageing women; the carving out of safe spaces; and reviews the liminal space of landscape mythology. Finally, the literature review explores the embodiment, connection to, and sense of place; of ageing in the landscape; and in and out of place. It reviews the spirit of a feminist cultural geographical place such as Uisneach, Ireland; and looks at the Goddess sites as feminist places of transcendence and transformation for older women. Completing this section is an examination of the literature pertaining to the fact that participatory-based narratives can act as a new way of expression of Identity for older women.

## 2.2 Older women and ageing: the global narrative

Ageing, a salient identity marker, is truly complex, incorporating not only the biological chronological process, but an integral sociocultural historical phenomenon, subject to transformation. Sawchuk (2018) defines ageing as a 'temporal process of embodied transformations that engages with other ageings that surround us' (p.217). While Moglen (2008) views ageing as a 'multiple, ambiguous, and contradictory process, which provides us – continuously and simultaneously – with images of the past, present, lost, embodied, and imagined selves' (p. 303-304).

In questioning how older women's unique experience of their identity can adversely impact their performance of self; findings from many feminist age studies which examined the socially constructed identities of older women in society, indicated a correlation between older women's invisibility in society, and their social inequality and lack of agency in that same society (Marshall and Katz, 2006, Lipscomb and Marshall 2010, Chivers 2011, Dolan and Tincknell 2012, Jennings, and Gardener 2012, Swinnen and Stotesbury, 2012, Gravagne 2013).

Ageing, like identity, is a socially constructed process, uniquely experienced by everyone through the interpretation of their lived experiences over their life course, within their social paradigms. Understanding of identity in old age is also complex; and subject to influence by the value systems, power, and ideology; of the social, legal, political, cultural, economic, physical, religious, medical, geographical, and media context, in which one lives. Ylanne (2012) posited that ageing; and the making meaning of identity are inextricably

linked. In interpreting one's ageing and identity; one's internalised experiential sociocultural, historical, political, psychological, and personal ecosystem of living and ecosystem/s of inheritance; needs to be considered. Simultaneously, the establishment and somatisation of one's identity, encompasses one's experiences of the heteronormative structural environment within which; one grew up in; and the pervading social norms; by which; one learns to steer one's life course.

In her book *Aged by Culture*, Gullette (2004) suggests that in the western world, the social construct of age has been normalised to neoliberal narratives of decline; which perpetuates ageism and ageist narratives. In negotiating one's identity as an older woman in western society; one is more likely to frame their identity in the mirror reflection of how they feel they are viewed in their society; subsequently internalising the socially constructed ideal of what society has determined older women to be. Thus, Gullette's (2004) seminal theoretical perspective which espouses that like gender and race, age is socially constructed by society; reinforces that we are aged by the culture we live in.

The hegemonic narrative of older women being of less value and unproductive to society; negatively emphasises the gender dichotomy of young and old. As O'Neill and Schrage-Früh (2018, p. 2) suggest 'Despite prevailing postfeminist rhetoric, in contemporary neoliberal society the potential for empowerment through consumerism only serves to heighten gender dichotomies of young and old.' Carving out one's identity as an older woman with agency, is challenging in a neoliberal society, where powerful sociocultural narratives equate youth with value and productivity. Encountering cultural semiotics through a cycle of signifiers in the everyday marking older women as devalued by age; prompts the formation of a cyclical feedback loop complexly reinforcing that devaluation; which in turn; has the propensity to shape one's identity and subsequent agency as an older woman.

From a sociological perspective, evidential research indicates that the dominant cultural narrative regarding the ideology of ageing in contemporary western society, tends to be a one-sided, linear decline narrative (Gullette, 1997); associating older age with the loss of cognitive and physical abilities. Manning (2004, p.21) concurs, referring to American culture as one that has come to socially construct aging as an experience associated with disease, loss, and negativity. Over the past five decades, this trope has grown exponentially



with regards to women; positioning them in a dual dichotomy of being either a successful productive ager; or a dependent frail ager. Proposed in the sixties (Havighurst, 1961) and spring boarded in the 1970s, this ubiquitous successful ageing paradigm appeared in political and sociocultural arenas alongside the emergence of neoliberalism whose main tenets are focused entirely on individualism, productivity, and consumerism (Rubinstein and de Medeiros, 2015).

Both the successful ageing paradigm and the policy model of neoliberalism; share fundamental co-existing values; placing an overemphasis on an individual's independence and responsibility to be a successful ager in; and for society. However, according to the feminist epistemology, this approach subsequently alienates those who are viewed to have failed. Feminist researchers such as Calasanti and King (2011); Katz (2001,2002; 2013); Rubinstein and de Medeiros (2015) and Marshall (2017) criticised the successful ageing concept which had further evolved in the nineties (Baltes and Baltes, 1990; Rowe and Kahn, 1998) for its lacking in consideration for the impact of; and interrelated constitutes of; ageing and intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1991), such as disability, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

Questioning Rowe and Kahn's central tenant that individual social action determines the future of that person as a successful ageing person; Rubinstein and de Medeiros (2015) identified that Rowe and Kahn's paradigm of successful ageing fails to consider a person's ecological and sociocultural upbringing, illness, disabilities, traumas, or negative lived experiences. Thus, by excluding an awareness of intersectionality; in which systems of inequality such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, indigenous origin, socioeconomic status, and other forms of discrimination can intersect in 'two or more grounds...interdependent and mutually constitutive,' (Sosa, 2017, p. 16); Rubinstein and de Medeiros (2015) conclude that Rowe and Kahn's analysis of successful ageing lacks the development of an intersectional approach to the cultural, political, economic, social or detailed policy agendas for the individual who may need help and support in life.

Marshall (2017) in her critique of the heteronormative underpinnings of the successful ageing paradigm, and other terms such as positive ageing, highlights the concerns raised in the critical literature:

[...] around its commodification, consonance with neoliberal modes of governance, overemphasis on the individual and individual action as the basis of success, neglect of structural inequalities and dividing practices that produce some bodies as unsuccessfully aged' (p. 364).

Manifestations of women's ageing constituted by society have focused on the 'successful' and 'productive' ager creating what Sontag coined the double standard of ageing (Sontag 1972). Sontag's book of the same name argued that this positionality of successful ageing had infiltrated the social norm to become the global dominant narrative. These narratives story older women to belong to two contrasting sides. On one side, the older woman is positioned either in a state of frailness or dependency (Cruikshank, 2013; Gullette, 2004), 'little old lady: small in stature, fragile, weak' (Grenier and Hanley, 2007, p. 213); while on the other side, the older woman appears as 'a successful ager' (Rowe and Kahn, 1998); normalising this signifier as a societal gold standard.

Consequently, the dominant narrative of successful aging and older women which has infiltrated western mediated culture; also has the potential to infiltrate and influence older women's psyche; synonymising and equating their age identity to how successfully aged and productive their society judges them to be. The successful ageing paradigm particularly marginalises older women who do not attain its standards of productivity, keeping youthful in appearance, not being a burden to society; and those who do not 'buy into' its narrative.

Correlating the tenets of the successful ageing concept to the capitalistic tenets of profit; Cruickshank (2003) argues that the concept of successful ageing is limiting as it is embedded in the neoliberal profit equals success narrative. Addressing gendered power relations, Aharoni and Ayalon (2022) claim that the devaluation of older women in neoliberal society where youth is sanctified; produces intersectional oppression.

Torres also evidences why the successful ageing paradigm, including the policy implementation models based on this paradigm, need to be questioned (Torres, 2004, 2006b; Torres and Karl, 2016). She identifies that what is understood to be successful ageing in one culture may not be in another; stating that in a 'highly globalized world such as ours, it is extremely problematic to design one-size-fits-all programs especially when

their ideological underpinnings only reflect Western and highly industrialized values,' (Torres et al., 2017, p. 4).

In terms of the potential internalisation of the two-sided ageing woman discourse of fragility versus success and the intersectional dimensions of discrimination, e.g., disability, sexuality, race, social or personal challenges, lack of access to resources or medical care (Davis, 2008); neoliberal narratives of ageing disempower older women's formation of positive identity as ageing women in western society. According to Butler's (2010) theory of gendered performativity; how we live or perform age correlates to the configurations of power structures in our society, and how we are shaped by those societal constructs of power. Therefore, in exploring older women, their ageing and identity in Ireland; the overarching complexness of women's social marginality; and the previous generations of Irish women's social marginality; of living through and in a patriarchal legislative, sociocultural, and religious context; needs to be contextualised.

In terms of different gerontological approaches to women's ageing, critical gerontology takes a sociological approach to ageing issues in the context of inherent social structures through research, policy and practice (Katz, 2003, 2010); while cultural gerontology, which views ageing as socially constructed (Gullette, 1997, 2004, 2011, 2017, 2018; Woodward, 1991, 1999, 2006; Katz, 2015, Twigg and Martin, 2015); emphasises the lived experiences of older people. Cultural gerontology covers a multifaceted umbrella approach incorporating philosophy (Baars, 2010; 2012a; 2012b), literature, film (Chivers, 2003, 2011), theatre, clothing (Twigg, 2013), and music (Jennings and Gardner, 2012; Gardner and Jennings, 2019). My study takes a cultural gerontological perspective; underpinned by a feminist intersectional creative methodological approach; to explore the lived experience of older women in Ireland with regards to their ageing and identity.

By exploring older women's sense of identity in contemporary Ireland through our participation in the rituals of the Celtic Festivals of the Seasons; My study offered a geoliminal space; exclusive from the hegemonic socially constructed view of older women in Irish society; for us to negotiate our identity as older women.

### 2.3 Missing from the media; the invisibility of older women in mediated culture

Ageing and cultural gerontological studies in the western world have evidenced the invisibility of older women in the media. Subsequently, without visibility, older women's societal identity becomes socially constructed by the dominant heteronormative socio-cultural narrative.

Acknowledging the impact of representation through cultural reflections in shaping identity; the explicit lack of representation or underrepresentation of older women in the media, e.g. film, television, advertising, media production and content; can be interpreted as a societal act of symbolic annihilation (a term first coined in the 1970s to describe the absence of women in the media) (Gerber 1973, 1976, 1997; Tuchman, Daniels, and Banat, 1978).

From a cultural perspective, the lack of positive representation of older women is significant, as it transverses from the page, television, advertisements, screen; magazine, stage, and paintings, to translate into the currency of everyday living.

Framing older women positively in the media and arts substantiates social existence as a member of society. Excluding them from the life stage of worthiness framed them as 'other'; which filters into the collective consciousness as a negative internalisation of older women. As historically evidenced for other marginalised groups; the exclusion of older women leads to a separateness; an otherness; a connection to negative representation; with this cohort in society experiencing stereotyping, discrimination, and social isolation (Collard-Stokes, 2020, p.155).

The impact of this banishment and/or negative portrayal of older women in the media are far reaching. Younger women do not have equitable access to potentially positive older women role models. If older women do make an appearance, it is likely to be in a negative, stereotypical role. Thus, the trope of the ageing woman in a negative stereotypical role not only reinforces the dominant youth and beauty narrative that a woman's identity and self-worth emanate from her physical appearance; it also has the power to normalise that trope in the societal psyche. Subsequently, the invasiveness of the successful ageing narrative

can lead to vicarious societal consequences which have the potential to negatively affect older women's sense of identity.

With regards to female role modelling, other women and female children may also internalise the shame propagated for failing to reach the societal standard. For men and male children, it sets out the gender divide and the 'problem of old women' (Gibson, 1996, p.433). It could be argued that lack of visibility; underrepresentation; and/or negative portrayal of older women in the media was indicative of the 1970s sociocultural context; and as media forums grew exponentially through globalisation, digitalisation, and technology; the visibility of older women in the media increased. However, contemporary research has evidenced how the endemic lack of representation of older women in the media propels gendered ageism, stereotyping, and discrimination.

Building on Greenberg's (1980) early research on minorities and their lack of representation in the mass media; Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012) explored the representation of older women in the media being doubly marginalised by age and gender. Using current images of older women in popular culture, television, films, advertising, and literature in America; they found that older women were portrayed in a negative way, negatively stereotyped as vanishing from the screen or appearing in background wallpaper roles. Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012) observed that

women vanish from the screen in central and powerful roles as the mature and do not occupy a significant role in narratives even in comparison to older men'...Furthermore, older women were less likely than older men to be presented as authority figures who are influential in the workplace; it was found that their sexuality was muted; and their bodies displayed as objects of ridicule rather than objects of desire (p. 167).

In challenging these stereotypes, Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012) noted the importance of how representing older women in positive positions in the media; may serve as role models through which women can interpret their ageing.

While Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012) identified that there is a breakthrough in current contemporary media, in that it has, to a great extent, broken away from traditional media

to become more inclusive in their representations for older women; they acknowledged that this access is not universal and 'is still the prerogative of a closed club of high-powered older women: Lesbians and women of color are rarely included'(p. 176).

Infiltrating positive older women representation in the media is an evolving process, existing alongside strict traditional perceptions of how older women should be portrayed. Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012) acknowledge the challenges of attitude change stating 'a feminist critique of media representations of older women is not a matter of the simple addition of changing attitudes. Past and present (and future) tend to exist simultaneously, as they often do in major change processes' (p.177).

Edström's (2018) Swedish study reflected on media images over the past three decades; analysing images from news, feature stories, fiction, and advertising; from one specific day in 1994, 2004, and 2014. Findings indicated that 'the accumulated gender representation of all images that we passively or actively take part in,' defined in Edström's study as 'the media buzz,' (p.77) suggest:

structures of visibility and the clusters of gender-age representation in the media foster stereotyping. The media buzz not only contributes to ageism but is also still distinctly gendered [...] Most mainstream media seem to signal that aging and older people, especially women, are not newsworthy, interesting, or desirable, (pp. 77-78).

In a culture which links social currency to youthful appearance, representations of older women in positive positions of agency in the media and the arts is congruent to creating a homeostasis of equitably human worth; regardless of gender.

This philosophy is important to my study. Positioning older women in Ireland as valued members of society with agency, will help destabilise the dominant hegemony of the negative socially constructed identity of older women in Ireland; and contribute to the dismantlement of the deep rooted structural and systematic discriminatory and inequality barriers of patriarchy.

## 2.4 Feminist theories of ageing, an intersectional approach

Feminist theory adopts a holistic intersectional approach to feminist gerontological research, focusing on analysing gender inequalities under themes of stereotyping; patriarchy; oppression; objectification; and discrimination. Hooyman et al., (2002, p. 3) proclaims that:

Feminist gerontology is grounded in feminist theory and critical gerontology and focuses on power relations and intersecting oppressions across the life course. Analyses that incorporate a feminist perspective broaden our understanding of aging, moving beyond a singular focus on gender to a broader focus on multiple aspects of diversity, including privilege, inequality, and interdependence.

Over the past few decades gerontological research such as, the gendering and marginalisation of older women in the media; the impact of the sociocultural context on older women's identity; and the impact and internalised consequences of the subliminal message of being a successful ager; constantly portrayed in the media, have evidenced older women's experiences and feelings of exclusion.

Conflicting strongly with feminist ideals of intersectionality, the dominant cultural narrative of ageing across the western world coincided with the rise in neoliberalism based on consumerism, capitalism, a reduction in government spending, an increase in the role of the private sector in the economy and heavy individualism and autonomy (Springer et al. 2016). It is within neoliberal cultures that older women find themselves positioned as 'other', as outside this ideology.

In the search for an innovative approach to explore ageing and the sociocultural context one lives in; Harrington, Bielby and Bardo (2014) called for 'a new line of inquiry located at the intersections of the life course studies and media studies that explore the present status and future directions of ageing, media and culture,' (p. 2). In concurrence with Gullette's (2003) concept of the power of autobiographical storytelling; Jennings and Grist (2017, p. 176), propose that narrating our lived experiences through storytelling as a new way to represent the views of older women. Dolan and Ticknell (2012) also notes that utilising women's narratives of their lived experience as older women propels them to the central voice of the research.

In examining what it means to age in contemporary society, Webster Wright (2019) posits that performing ageing as women is influenced by our own and societal expectations, referencing Lyne Segal (2013) stance that the sharing of our alternative stories as older women is a radical feminist act which challenges the stereotypes and creates new cultural images. Bühring (2020) focuses on the meaning making that lifecourse narratives can address:

[...] lifecourse narratives in queer, feminist, and critical theory; are also viewed as a key concept in cultural gerontology since they are essential in creating coherence and meaning in one's life, aiding human beings in integrating the past with the present and enable envisioning the future (n.p).

In concurrence with Bühring, the key concept of life narratives in creating coherence and meaning in one's life' is integral to the purpose of my study. From a cultural gerontological perspective, inviting the women to explore their life narratives as older women through poetry, their individual poetry; and the collaborative communal poetry of the group; provided them with an opportunity to negotiate and make meaning of their identity.

## 2.5 Lived experiences of older women ageing in, and with, Ireland

Globally, population ageing is increasing exponentially. According to the United Nations (2023, p. iv), 'the number of persons aged 65 years or older worldwide is expected to double over the next three decades, reaching 1.6 billion in 2050, when older people will account for more than 16 percent of the global population'. With regards to the population ageing of women, Hofmeiser et al (2017, p.3) notes that women aged over fifty comprise over 17% of the world's population.

In Ireland, a country of 5 million, population ageing estimates that there are 1.3 million people aged 60 and over. By 2046, there will be 2.44 million aged 60 and over, making up one third of the island's total population (World Health Organisation, 2018).

In European terms, Ireland is seen as being a young country. However, taking into consideration certain demographic factors, such as; having high birth rates up to the 1980s and 1990s (higher than other European countries); the high emigration rates of Irish people; and the high rates of immigration into Ireland in the 2000s; the economic and Social



Research Institute (ESRI) (2017) projected that by 2030; the population in Ireland aged 80 or above, would increase by between 89 percent and 94 per cent (O' Brien, 2013).

Laslet (1989) coined this later age group as the fourth age, describing it as seen to be a stage of dependency. Within the context of fourth age world population ageing; a consistent demographic trend identifies that women live longer than men:

A consequence of women's greater longevity is an older population that is predominately female: in 2017, women accounted for 54 per cent of the global population aged 60 years or over and 61 per cent of those aged 80 years or over... Projections indicate that in 2050, women will comprise 53 per cent of the world's population aged 60 years or over (United Nations, 2017, p. 14).

Considering the combination of Ireland's unique demographic trends (which differ from the rest of Europe); the increasing proportion of women in the older age groups in Ireland has not counterbalanced, resulting in consistently more older females than males. According to the Irish Central Statistics Office (2016); 'Between 2011 and 2016, the number of females aged 65 and over increased by 16.7 percent to 340,730, while males aged 65 and over increased by 22 per cent to 296,837 since 2011'.

Another unique demographic is the high proportion of older women in Ireland living a solo life; because of; being widowed; never marrying; marrying late in life and not having children; and are experiencing ageing in a multitude of ways (Reilly, Hafford-Letchfield and Lambert, 2021).

From an economic perspective, the projected exponential shift in the demographic trend of population ageing poses significant policy challenges on a global level, e.g., health care; long term care; socio economic; fiscal; pension; and other age-related public expenditure. Whilst demographic trends reflect a rising ageing population as a result of better healthcare and medical advances; consequently, as a result of longevity and declining birth rates; this transformation of life expectancy; the economic challenges; and consequences of what has been called the 'grey tsunami' (Hill, 2020, Online) appear to be implicit, underlying, just below the surface of the political and media agenda.

Conversely, this template of accelerating population ageing could, in effect, provide an opportunity for the landscape of ageing to pivot, disrupt, and reconfigure; how the societal perception of older people, specifically older women, is socially constructed within Irish society.

In this study, exploring our lived experiences of ageing in, and with Ireland; provided an opportunity for us to reflect on their identities and how they are perceived and understood in the Irish sociocultural context (Goffman, 1959; Hall, 1973, 1993, 1997; Giddens, 1993; Cruikshank, 2003).

In mediated Irish culture, the lack of images of older women influences how older women in Ireland are perceived (Gullette, 2004; Woodward 1991, 1999; Yläne, 2012; Furman, 2013). Whilst there exists a great deal of research on the social and cultural experiences of ageing for women, in other western contexts (Gullette, 1997; Cruikshank, 2003; Twigg and Martin, 2015); historically, there has been a paucity of robust evidence on older women's lived experiences of ageing in the Irish context (O'Shea and Conboy, 2015).

In my study, the women participants, including myself, who grew up in Ireland, grew up under the dual dominant patriarchal narrative of Church and state. Growing up in spaces of inequality and injustice (Butler, 2010); where women's participation in public life and public sector was either non-existent or limited; we performed being girls and young women. Now we are performing being older women.

To understand the indoctrinated governmentality of patriarchal structures in the context of Ireland; one must look through a spatial postcolonial lens of a gendered ideology underpinning legislation and formation of culture. In 1922, after 753 years of colonial rule, Ireland was declared a Free State. In this postcolonial arena, the Catholic Church became more overtly concerned with the moral control of female sexuality. As a main form of control over women's bodies and sexuality, incarcerate and punitive measures were increasingly imposed on women, with Magdalene laundries becoming the form of social control up to 1996 (Luddy 1995; 2001). During this period of postcoloniality, Ireland incarcerated more women per capita than any other country in the world (Feeney, 2021). Thus, an incarcerate state for 'fallen women' became normalised in the consciousness of

Irish society. Taking a Foucauldian approach, Crowley and Kitchin (2008) document how the postcolonialism method of governmentality regulated and disciplined the moral geography of women's sexual conduct and sexuality, to produce what would become a societal norm of 'decent girls' (p.355).

With the introduction of legislation targeting women by limiting their access to work and public spaces; 'confining women to an unsullied (marital) home, and threatening new sites of reform, such as the Magdalene Asylums, County Homes, Mother and Baby Homes, Reformation, and Industrial Homes'...Crowley and Kitchin contend that this gendered project was ... 'a highly spatialised endeavour' (p.355).

McAuliffe (2011) argued that gendered legislation passed by the new state positioned women in Ireland to the home. The social conservative state and traditional Catholic thinking 'relegated the contribution of women in the new state to the sphere of the home'... 'to serve as the moral cornerstone of the new Catholic nation, without which the nation would not and could not develop morally, politically and socially' (p.43).

In 1925 the right for women to sit for examinations to enter the civil service was limited (The Civil Service Amendment Act, 1925); and the 1932 marriage bar which eventually included the civil service, required female primary teachers who married, to resign their position (this ban remained in place until 1958 when it was lifted).

Women's employment was always a contentious issue. Despite the best efforts of women such as Louie Bennet and Helena Molloy of the Irish Women's Workers' Union (IWWU) (who referred to the promise of equality for all in the 1922 constitution); the introduction of the 1935 Act limited industries in employing women (Gialanella Valiulis; 2012, online). McAuliffe (2011) ascertains that the legacy of the 1935 Act contributed to the rise in emigration of women from Ireland; stating that gendered legislation affected 'the position of the female worker in Ireland, legally and ideologically, until late into the twentieth century' (p.45).

While this study seeks to explore women's perspectives on their identity in relation to their lived experiences of ageing in Ireland; in order to set the scene of how older women are

seen, valued, and validated in contemporary Ireland; it is important to have a contextual awareness of the trajectory of how women were historically valued as members of society in Ireland. To do so, one must engage with an understanding of the historical structural political, jurisprudence and religious forces of power at play; the forces of power which shaped the internal workings of postcolonial Ireland's conscience and psyche, legislatively, sociocultural, and morally.

## 2.6 The Catholic Church, the Irish State, and the Projection of Postcolonial Nationhood

One hundred and thirty years ago, in 1893, American suffragette and historian Matilda Joslyn Gage explored the impact of the western institutions of Church and state on women in her essay *Women, Church, and State*. Gage 'came to argue that institutions were the cause of woman's degradation, and this was especially so in western societies'...and...that women's historical experiences have implications to the present day.' (Mosher Stuard, 2017, p. 901).

Throughout the last century in Ireland, the impact of a three-pronged approach of structural forces of power being used to dominate, diminish, devalue, exclude, silence, and subjugate women is indisputably evident. In postcolonial Ireland, women had to navigate their lives under an inescapable spotlight of projected madonafication of nation; whereby combined patriarchal forces created an ideology of the new Republic's nationhood as chaste, virginal, and asexual women (except within marriage, where sex was normalised for the purpose of procreation); with the expectation, legislatively and sociocultural, of women embodying this ideology.

Alongside the Catholic Church's incarcerate, punitive, repressive, and excluding directives (particularly directed towards unmarried pregnant women); women have had to live their lives under the state's legislation and codified constitution; discriminating against women and women's rights and incarcerating women within the home (Cowley and Kitchin, 2008; Redmond 2004; Earner-Byrne, 2004).

From a religious standpoint, the Catholic Church's monopoly on morality focused specifically on women's perceived sexual immorality and the policing of women's bodies.

Church and state compositely stranded together in a steel wire helix rope of purity obsessed morality, which lashed out legislatively across the bodies and lives of women. The dominant Catholic Church had a hold on the state like a pup between its master's teeth and it shook that pup to obey its orders. In the community, the priest could pluck a woman who was pregnant and not married, out of their family; or command the Gardai (the Irish police) to do so and banish them and their children to a life of incarceration within the Magdalene Laundries or the Mother and Baby homes. In this society, women were penalised on multiple levels. Feeney (2021), with regards to the Mother and Baby homes notes that 'Women, pregnant outside of marriage, who ended up in these dire institutions, often did so due to incest and rape' (Feeney, 2021, online).

The formation of the Free State in 1922 appears to have given impetus to the Catholic Church's obsession with the morality and purity of women; and the incarceration of so-called fallen women increased voraciously. Within this unique Irish architecture of containment (Smith 2007; 2007a); between 1922 and 1996, 'well over 10,000 women and girls, as young as nine, were incarcerated in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries' (O'Rourke, 2016, p. 4). According to the Commission report on the investigation into Mother and Baby homes (2021, online) who investigated fourteen Mother and Baby homes and four county homes:

There were about 56,000 unmarried mothers and about 57,000 children in the mother and baby homes and county homes investigated by the Commission. The greatest number of admissions was in the 1960s and early 1970s. It is likely that there were a further 25,000 unmarried mothers and a larger number of children in the county homes which were not investigated.

Patriarchal Ireland hinged its postcolonial identity as a new nation, to be contingent on its women being morally pure. Women's identity was linked to their moral behaviour; and anyone who was seen as shameful or lacking in respectability; unmarried mothers; the sexually promiscuous; the socially transgressive; and those merely guilty of being in the way were hidden away from society (Smith, 2007).

Demonising women who became pregnant while unmarried was a source of control by the Catholic Church. This system of othering ensured that much of the population married, remaining under the control of the Church. The threat to women of being disappeared and

incarcerated because of pregnancy outside marriage; being at risk of promiscuity and having loose morality; entered the sociocultural psyche of the nation. Crowley and Kitchin (2008) identified the Catholic Church's intensification of the disciplinary structures of shame used from the pulpit and the schools.

Encapsulating the Catholic Church's philosophy in dealing with the problem of women's morality; *Ireland's Children of Shame* documentary (Real Stories, 2018) focusing on the lived experience of the women who enters Magdalene laundries evidenced their psychological identity obliteration. The women were forbidden to speak except for prayers, they had their heads shaved, their birth names erased, and were renamed with a name determined by the nuns. They were sent to work washing the laundry (belonging to government departments, church, private houses) for financial gains for the nuns (of which they did not receive any recompense). O'Rourke (2016), a lawyer who has advocated before the Irish and the United Nations Human Rights bodies on behalf of the women who were incarcerated in the Magdalene laundries; sets out the conditions these women were subject to:

[...] verbally denigrated and humiliated; kept in cold conditions with minimal nourishment and hygiene facilities; denied any education; and forced to work, constantly and unpaid, at laundry, needlework, and general chores through the coercive force of the above factors and additional punishments including deprivation of meals, solitary confinement, physical abuse, and humiliation rituals (p. 158).

The language used by the Church with regards to these women was legalistic in terminology; women who had become pregnant outside marriage for the first time were categorised as first-time offenders; if those women subsequently had another child outside marriage; they were known as repeat offenders.

Women, now in their third age who grew up in Ireland, would be aware of that nuanced unspoken threat which hung in the air. This intrinsic silent stigma, fear and shame of women pulsed in the ether filtering into lived experiences; it was there; it could be felt; it may not have been verbalised; but it was implicitly corporealised by the body. Describing

an awareness of a somatic knowing of 'the fear' (which was not spoken about); Irish author Marian Keyes says:

I was born in 1963 [...] It was a really odd country, Ireland back then [...] I'm kind of porous and I picked up the fear [...] They (my parents) were afraid [...] I took bits and pieces of their fear (or their devotion) and obviously created something else (*Tommy Tiernan Show*, 2021).

Compounding the fear for women in Ireland was that if they did become pregnant outside marriage, their baby could be taken away from them. Survivor's testimonies from the Mother and Baby Commission report (2021) evidenced the women who were disappeared by society having their babies taken from them. *The Children of Shame* documentary also featured survivor's testimonies of their babies being taken from them, revealing that in later life; the survivors found out that many children were adopted out illegally by the nuns to America and within Ireland for financial gain (Real Stories, 2018).

In the Commission into the Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes (2021). Drązkiewicz Grodzicka (2021) argues:

Unmarried pregnant women were sent to those institutions for 'resocialisation' and support. In reality, they were psychologically and physically abused. They lived in atrocious conditions, carrying out forced labour. Mothers were separated from their babies, who on most occasions were given away for adoption, often illegally. Many children died from malnourishment or neglect (p. 12).

While the 'extensive and systemic sexual, emotional and physical abuse of thousands of children by clergy, in Church-run industrial schools, orphanages, and in the infamous Magdalene laundries and Bethany Homes' have since been revealed in the many abuse inquiries (Harper, 2017, pp. 295-296); it was a known unspoken truth that most Magdalene 'penitents' were institutionalised for that particular Irish sin of perceived sexual morality. Some of the women were considered single mothers, some the victims of incest and rape, and some were considered prostitutes (Smith, 2007, p. 208); incarcerated as a means of safeguarding their moral purity. These women had 'no official sentence and thus had no mandated release date' (Smith, 2007, p. 431); and some of these women died behind the Magdalene walls.

In 1953 adoption became legalised in Ireland (O'Halloran, 2009); however, evidence suggests that some children who were not adopted remained in the homes until they were placed in Industrial Schools (Brady 2017). Further evidence suggests that many babies in fact perished before they could be placed anywhere (Gleeson, 2017, p. 295). Higher rates of morbidity than in the general population were recorded for the babies and children born in these institutions (Commission into the Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes [CIMBH] 2021, p. 6); and it was found that the institutions 'also hosted unethical clinical and vaccination trials,' (Department of Health, 1997; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2021). The horror of what happened to women and children in Ireland is omnipresent. Evidence of further atrocities was unearthed in 2014; when the bodies of 798 babies and young children were found in a septic tank at the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, Co. Galway, (CIMBH, 2021).

In this study, the women participants who grew up in patriarchal Ireland in an era of accepted and normalised state and Church collusion; would be aware of implicit societal norms of intergenerational shame, guilt, discrimination, and stigmatisation of women. One of the mandatory Catholic ceremonies continuing up to the 1970s was the churching ceremony of women who have recently given birth (Lewis, 2013). For some women, this ceremony symbolised the continued stigmatisation of women in Ireland. According to Azimi (2013, online), 'A lot of women [...] did not support the ceremony or the idea of being 'churched' [...] A lot of them felt the stigma of being labelled as 'tainted' or 'dirty' after [...] childbirth as something that affected them for the rest of their lives.'

Two seminal cases of how women and girls were treated by the forces of power in Irish society emerged in the 1980s; awakening the public to the historical ill treatment of women and children (Donnelly 2016; Garrett, 2017). In 1984, the landmark cases of Ann Lovett and the Kerry babies' case (Joanne Hayes) represented a watershed time in Irish history, counterbalancing forever the societal stigma towards mothers who are not married (Maher and O'Brien, 2017).

Fifteen-year-old Ann Lovett who died giving birth in a grotto, instigated a seminal national debate on the treatment of women who gave birth outside marriage. As Ingle (2017)



attests to in her article, 'Girl, 15, Dies Giving Birth in A Field'; Ann's story continues to resonant in the nation's psyche today (O Doherty, 2014; Boland, 2018).

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 1984, Ann, a student, died after giving birth alone beside a Virgin Mary grotto in the Irish midlands (Gartland, 2014). Wrapped in her coat, her baby boy was dead, and Ann died later that day of irreversible shock caused by haemorrhage and exposure during childbirth. Her community, clergy, school and family purported to have no knowledge of her pregnancy. However, O'Toole reported 'parochial roles in a wilful national prejudice concerning the 'illegitimate' consequences of sex were clearly played' (1998, p. 154).

Ann's story was immortalised in Irish sociocultural history through newspaper articles, books, radio documentaries, poems, and songs; and she became documented as a modern martyr and saint (Harris, 1996). In RTÉ Radio's documentary 'Letters to Ann', Paula Meehan, in her (2013) poem; The Statue of the Virgin at Granard; evokes Ann's story as 'she pushed her secret out into the night, far from the town tucked up in little scandals, ' (Lines 56-61, 2013); and the context of Ann's story is forever immortalised in Christy Moore's song (with lyrics written by Nigel Rolf); 'Everybody knew, nobody said,' (Moore, 2013). In terms of the historical culture of shame in Ireland, the release of the film 'Ann' in 2022 is testimony to the legacy and impact of Ann's story.

The second case, colloquially known as the Kerry Babies case, evidenced how unmarried women were treated in terms of their morality by the Garda Síochana (police) at that time. In 1984, Joanne Hayes, who was known by the Garda to be in a relationship with a married man, was arrested on suspicion of infanticide of a baby boy, whose body was found with multiple injuries, on a beach in Cahersiveen, Kerry, some 80 kilometres from her home. Joanne denied the murder of the baby found on Cahersiveen beach; admitting that she had concealed her own baby's birth, who had died at childbirth and was buried on the family farm in Abbeydorney, County Kerry.

When the body of her miscarried baby was not found, Joanne Hayes was arrested and was later committed to an institution for the mentally ill. Despite the later discovery of the body of Joanne Hayes' baby on the

grounds of the farm where she lived proving thus her innocence, Joanne Hayes remained incarcerated for some time (Quinn, 2012, p. 21).

This case demonstrated the ferocity of the State in challenging the sexual morality of unmarried women. According to Quinn (2012), when blood tests proved that the murdered baby on the beach belonged to a different blood group from Joanne and her baby's father; the Garda Síochana refused to believe the outcome, insisting that superfecundation had taken place. They persisted with the belief that Joanne had become pregnant simultaneously by two men, gave birth to two babies, and murdered one of the babies on Cahersiveen beach.

This case perpetuated the subjugation of women's rights within the Irish jurisprudence system. After the murder charges were finally rejected; accusations of police brutality in relation to the exhortation of statements from Joanne and her family emerged. The Women's Movement pressured the state to investigate how the guards had handled the case; leading to a state tribunal in 1985. However, 'While it quickly became clear that the baby found on the beach could not be the corpse of Joanne Hayes's infant, the State continued to invoke a defence that sought to prove her guilt' (Quinn, 2012, p. 21). Joanne was cross examined on the stand for five days, the longest anyone had spent on the stand up to that point in Ireland. Interrogated about her sex life, menstrual cycle and use of contraception; Joanne was subjected to 'more than 2,000 questions – many of them about her sex life, some of them prurient, judgmental and gynaecological in their detail' (Online, Murtagh and Lucey, 2018).

The Kerry Babies tribunal attracted major media coverage. Women's groups protested outside the court as Joanne Hayes's morals were put on trial. Traumatized and retraumatized, 'Joanne was forced to 'relive' the harrowing experience of childbirth in a field and was interrogated about how much she had bled before, during, and after childbirth,' (Ferriter and Hickey, 2014, online). Aggressive questioning sought to depict her as a woman of 'loose morals', 'promiscuous' and 'capable of anything' (Ferriter and Hickey, 2014, online). Feminists who protested about this humiliation of Joanne were called 'raucous ignorant urban dwellers' by Judge Lynch (Ferriter and Hickey, 2014, online). While the case concluded that Joanne Hayes was not the mother of the murdered baby; the

Tribunal itself was a whitewash, and the guards were exonerated of any wrongdoing (Ferriter and Hickey, 2014, online).

With regards to Girard's paper; *Sexual Transgression and Scapegoats: A Case Study from Modern Ireland*, which 'relies on Foucault's (1995) theory of disciplinary power'; Girard's concept of the scapegoat; and Said's notion of how 'others' came to be constituted as exotic'; Inglis, (2002, p. 5) argues that Joanne Hayes was systematically portrayed as a sexual predator who threatened the long-established patriarchal order of regulating; punishing; and reforming female sexual morality.

Ann Lovett and Joanne Hayes' stories awoke the Irish public's conscience. Inglis (2004) identified that these cases revealed Ireland's awakening from the Catholic Church's monopoly over sexual morality; what happens when people ignore how the Garda operate; and of the power between Garda, lawyers, and judges.

The finding of the murdered infant also brought to the fore the unspeakable; sexual abuse, incest, infanticide, shame, and fear; which existed in the consciousness of society; but was not verbalised. Quinn (2012) notes that the body of the murdered infant 'unsettled the defined and tightly bound 'mechanisms' that had sealed the space of the body within official discourse,' (p. 21).

According to Ferriter and Hickey (2014) the Kerry Babies case caused a 'shattering of the illusions of the Island of saints and scholars, and Catholic and sexual purity' and revealed how certain institutions and individuals of the State operated 'the idea of a closing of rank, in order to try and scapegoat someone, the idea of an abuse of power of the State [...] the networks that are at work and the gendered nature of this [...] the lack of balance,' (online).

Contemporary Ireland has become a nation of apologies. It took thirty-four years for the state to officially confirm, with DNA evidence; that Joanne Hayes was not the mother of the murdered baby. In 2018, Joanne was given an apology by the then Minister for Justice and the Taoiseach (Hutton, 2020). Referring to both the Lovett and Hayes's cases, as particularly reflective of the 1980's patriarchal dominance of the Catholic morality and the policing by the state of Irish women's bodies; Gartland (2014) identified that the Kerry

Babies scandal brought unmarried motherhood, extra-marital sex and how women in distress are treated, into the centre of the Irish media.

Reflecting on women's trauma, Harper, an Irish woven fabric artist interpreted through her work *Oestrogen Rising 2016: Ireland's stained and bloodied cloths*; the politicising segregation of disappeared women who had 'fallen' in the eyes of Irish society. Her work evidenced the plight of the thousands of women and girls, incarcerated, and abused, who worked unpaid in institutions, washing the ecclesiastical garments of the clergy; and the cloths of governmental, civic, and commercial bodies.

Harper reinforced the context of brutality, shaming, and stigmatisation, which was part of these women's daily lives:

As an Irish feminist, sense-making of the complexities, conundrums, challenges and contradictions of my land, my cloth, my body, and my culture owes much to Irishwomen before me who fought for female suffrage, (p.289).

The death of Ann Lovett and the Kerry Babies case are etched forever as demarcations of 1980s Ireland. Along with the abortion and divorce referendum; the challenge to the illegal status of homosexuality in Ireland; and the emergence of AIDS; these markers of history were 'identified as challenges to the national ethos and habitus,' (Quinn, 2012, p.9).

The women participants and I who lived in Ireland would have been in our thirties in the 1990s; when investigative uncovering of the high-profile clerical abuse cases, and news of the institutional segregation scandals and controversies, became nationally and internationally infamous (Garrett, 2013, 2016, 2017). Lentin's 1996 documentary *Dear Daughter* based on Christine Buckley's accounts of the atrocities she experienced as a mixed-race child in Dublin's Goldenbridge orphanage (McGarry, 2014); was the first televised exposure of the horrific abuse of children in Ireland's industrial schools. Rafferty and O' Sullivan's (1999) explosive book and documentary; *States of Fear*, opened the floodgates on the coercive control of the Church in Irish society.

According to O'Rourke (2016), after years of silence and then denial, the state's position on the abuses recorded in the Magdalene Laundries was that the Laundries were privately

owned and operated and were therefore, not the state's responsibility. The state continued to deny that there was systematic torture or ill treatment right up until February 2013; when a case was taken to the United Nations Human Rights Commission who called for an investigation into allegations of abuse; and only then did the state apologise.

Later in 2013, the then Taoiseach Kenny issued a state apology to survivors of the Magdalene Laundries 'for the hurt that was done to them, and for any stigma they suffered, as a result of the time they spent in a Magdalene Laundry.' He stated:

We took their babies (unmarried mothers) and gifted them, sold them, trafficked them, starved them, neglected them, or denied them to the point of their disappearance from our hearts, our sight, our country and, in the case of Tuam and possibly other places, from life itself,' (Kenny, 2013, online).

Findings from the Commission of Investigation into the Mother and Baby Homes Report (CIMBR) (2021) indicated that 9000 children died between 1922 and 1998 in the eighteen institutions investigated; 15 percent of the approximately 57,000 child residents. Eight years later, on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021, an apology was issued on behalf of the State to the former residents of the Mother and Baby homes, by the then Taoiseach, Martin; identifying a 'profound failure' of empathy, understanding and compassion over several decades' (O'Halloran, 2021, online). Martin apologised for the 'profound generational wrong visited upon Irish mothers and their children'; acknowledging the stigma and abuse that women in Ireland had suffered over the years; that women were treated as outcasts; 'the senses of abandonment were palpable' and women and children had left Ireland because of that; concluding that 'We honoured piety but failed to show even basic kindness to those who needed it most,' (O'Halloran, 2021, online).

However, lessons of uncovering secrets, instigating processes of reconciliation, and affording Irish citizens the right to their identity in contemporary society have not been learned. In October 2020, legislation was passed to seal the Mother and Babies home records; effectively closing off the records of those mothers and babies; now grown women; birth, adoptive and lived experiences for another thirty years. The 'murky and permeable boundaries of Irish Church and State' (Gleeson, 2017, p.296) continues to shut

the door to their identity for these women and children who are without a statutory right to one's birth certificate and adoption file. For some, having a right to an identity is not necessarily an automatic right. The Birth Information and Tracing (Irish Statute Law, 2022) which enshrines in law the importance of a person knowing their identity hopes to address this right; however, as of the 9th December, 2022, while some people have been waiting for 30, 40, 50 and 60 years to access their information, the Adoption Authority of Ireland has informed 'adopted people seeking personal records related to their birth, early life and medical history... that they may not receive the documents for almost a year' (Ryan, 2022, online).

For the women in my study who grew up in the 80s, carving out one's identity also meant navigating the historic, legislative, religious, and sociocultural structures of misogyny. The 1980s were a troublesome time for women in Ireland where cases of discrimination against women continued to present. According to Boland (2019), teacher Eileen Flynn was dismissed by her employer the Holy Faith nuns, for living with a married man and having his child; and Ban Garda Majella Moynihan, who, having had a child with her fellow unmarried garda recruit, was not only pressured to give the child up for adoption; but was also charged with alleged breaches of Garda regulations the following year. These women's cases epitomise the impact of the Church and state's patriarchal forces which dominated women lives; subjecting them to be devalued and othered in, and by, Irish society:

Exploring the scholarship of shame in '*Shame, the Church and the Regulation of Female Sexuality*,' Clough's (2017) examines the Kerry babies' case and the Magdalene laundries, reflecting on the impact of the Irish state's institutionalised collusion and regulation of female sexuality. Among the main themes to emerge is the state's control of women's bodies and the habitual shaming of women.

The women in this study who grew up in Ireland occupied a living space synonymous with patriarchal religiously dominated context of Catholic morality and policing of female sexuality. Aware of the nuances of the dominant narrative about female sexuality; as young girls, we learned to dance cautiously in and out of everyday sociocultural, religious, and political negotiations.

Journeying through a feminine, mythological, liminal, and geographical space; away from the 'masculinist paradigm' story (Hanafin, 1997) that we were told; which was inferred about us; and to us; this study provided for older women to retell their story in a new way; out from under the intergenerational shame with which women in postcolonial Ireland were ascribed.

Disrupting the postcolonial power structures of Church and state offers a way to reclaim women's stories; as opposed to the interpretation and objectification of women as iconographical containers of nationalistic morality and purity. It offers an opportunity to break free of the birdcage, release our own stories, birth the new narrative for older women; and draft the new story of our identity.

## 2.7 Shifting sands, major cultural changes for women in Ireland

Acknowledging that there have been cataclysmic changes in legislation regarding gender equality and discrimination, for example, in terms of same sex marriages (Irish Statute Board, 2015); deeply rooted patriarchal structures in the foundations of social, religious, and legislative power in twenty first century Ireland still exists.

Ireland's codified constitution Bunreacht na hÉireann (Ireland, 1945) written in 1937 was underpinned by a Catholic ethos. Until the introduction of the Thirty first Amendment of the Constitution Children Act (Irish Statute Book, 2012) which finally gave recognition to children's rights as individuals; the rights of the married family were held as the highest legal threshold, in legislative and subsequently sociocultural terms.

Reflecting on Ireland's identity as a postcolonial country, Hynes defines Ireland as relatively new, and 'in many ways, a postcolonial space' (2007, p. 8). The ideals of the Irish Proclamation of Independence (1916) promised to guarantee 'religious and civil liberty, equal rights, and equal opportunities to all its citizens'; regardless of their gender (The Proclamation, 1916). However, the increasingly conservative Free State and the increasingly powerful influential Catholic Church asserted that; 'Irish women's citizenship was to be defined by domestic life in the home, marriage and motherhood' (Hynes, 2007, p.8). The promise of equality to women did not materialise and was soon forgotten for all Irish women, including the revolutionaries who fought with Cumann na mBan (The Irish

Women's Council), and the feminists who campaigned for women's rights. The new postcolonial space became an unsafe space for the women in Ireland.

Rendering 1918 a false dawn for Irish women, McAuliffe (2018) argues that the time of the Free State when women's rights became marginalised; has implications to the present day. De Valera's Ireland in 1938 subsequently enshrined women's identity as married, homemaker and mother. In the eyes of the state, women were duty bound to become mothers and it became an implicit major constituent of a woman's identity. Hynes (2007) captures the centrality of procreation as a vital duty for Irish women:

Maternity and fertility have long occupied a central space in both Irish nationalist and Catholic rhetoric, from the veneration of Mother Mary and Mother Ireland to de Valera's infamous constitution that encourages women to make their contribution to the nation by staying home and raising babies, (p.62).

Thus, in Ireland, the social construction of women's identity in hegemonic discourse became legislatively locked by the semiotic embeddedness in the political, postcolonial, and sociocultural birdcage; of an Irish woman as mother in the home. According to Wood (2014):

The influence of the Catholic Church on the Irish State ensured that the family was given special status within the 1937 Constitution, which pledges to protect the institution of Marriage on which the family is founded. The patriarchal family unit and the institution of heterosexual marriage as its locus are given official sanction here; sexualities, genders and identities not conforming to such heteronormative models are marginalised and excluded from the canon of national belonging (p.4).

Sweetman's (2020) book *Feminism Backwards*, documents the growing unrest from women in Ireland who retaliated to the discrimination they faced in every aspect of their lives. Sweetman defined that for women entering marriage, it meant 'civil death' (p.121), that it legally rendered a woman as her husband's property, and the legal guardian of their children:

He could desert her and their children, for as long as he wished, then return and resume all marital and parental rights. Whilst a woman would have lost all rights - including to her children, and her home, if she left. He could divorce her in England, take the children and sell the family home, all without her knowledge or her say-so. He could have the children on his



passport and take them abroad. She couldn't. He had total control of all money, including hers, including the Children's Allowance, including bank accounts, credit union loans, hire purchase agreements and savings, (p.121-122).

Resistance intensified with the setting up of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (IWLM) in 1971. Their manifesto, *Chains or Change*, (IWLM, 1971) demanded 'equal pay, the end to the marriage bar for working women, equal rights in law, justice for widows, 'deserted wives', and 'unmarried mothers', equal education opportunities, contraception as a human right, and one family, one house' (p.121). However, Hanafin (1997, p.249), notes that 'Ireland is a paradigmatic case of how a patriarchal cultural narrative insinuated itself into the legal narrative, and in particular, the constitutional text. Thus, the traditional masculine his(story) became the way in which law's story was told in the constitutional narrative.' Patriarchal underpinning of the Irish constitution laid down the legislature for the suppression of female bodily autonomy and identity. The legacy of this patriarchal, legislative, and Catholic tri formation of constitution remains embedded in patriarchal power structures of contemporary Ireland.

Lynch et al., (2016) examines how Irish society continues to reflect the broader dynamics of late modernity and post crisis 'recovery' in a highly globalised neoliberal context (p.23); stating that 'The enduring influence of the Catholic familial frameworks, a male breadwinner model, anti-intellectualism and a strong ideology of the market and charity in political culture and public policy still dominate,' (p.23). Cullen and Corcoran (2020) concur, documenting how the social, religious, and legislative patriarchal power structures produce knowledge and reproduce gender in modern Ireland.

Gender Inequalities exist in pay, education, and employment for women in contemporary Ireland; with the most notable inequalities in health policies and the policing of women's bodies (Quinlan, 2017). Legacies of the Catholic Church's control of women's bodies and procreation infiltrated and influenced medical decisions and procedures, such as the barbaric surgical procedure of symphysiotomy, practised from 1944 to 1984 in Ireland (O Connor, 2021, online). According to Harper (2016) some 1500 women in Ireland experienced the barbaric birth procedure of symphysiotomy, 'the non-consensual splitting apart, by circular or hacksaw, of...women's pelvises—some in women as young as 14—during labour, as a medical alternative to a caesarean birth' (p.298). This brutal surgical procedure

which caused ongoing health and social problems throughout the women's lives; with a risk of causing 'incontinence, chronic pain, walking difficulties, mental trauma, and even family breakdown' (Harper, 2016, p.298); was based more on religious beliefs than sound medical knowledge (O'Connor, 2021, online). The strapping up of women's pelvises enables them to carry more pregnancies afterwards and 'Ireland's ideological restrictions on artificial contraception, cultural avoidance of sterilisation, and only limited use of so-called compassionate hysterectomy well into the 1980s encouraged its practice' (Harper, 2016, p.298). Despite being banned in most countries before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 'art of symphysiotomy for delivery in the instance of cephalopelvic disproportion has been a dying art since the advent of caesarean section but in Ireland this surgical procedure was not abolished until 1992,' (Shaarani, van Eeden and O'Byrne, 2016, p. 48).

One of the defining cases in Ireland of a lack of autonomy for women's health is the 2012 case of Savita Halappanavar. Savita, despite having an inevitable miscarriage, was denied an abortion, and told by the nursing staff that Ireland is a Catholic country. Tragically, Savita died of medical septicaemia as a result.

Harper (2017) suggests:

Arguably as a consequence of the Eighth Amendment, Galway woman Savita Halappanavar's prolonged miscarriage in 2012 was allowed to continue without abortive intervention, allowing consequent development of fatal septic shock for the mother (Holland, 2012). Medical termination of this wanted but unsalvageable foetus would likely have averted Savita's death, but uncertainty and contention still prevail in Ireland on action in miscarriage, and delay saw 'nature taking its course' for both mother and foetus (p.296).

With regards to the case of Natasha Perie, a twenty-six-year-old maternal somatic woman from our community in the Irish midlands; national and international media evidenced the influence of the Eighth Amendment on medical decisions and procedures within the Irish health system, with regards to women's health. On November 7<sup>th</sup> 2014, following the rupture of a large cerebral cyst, Natasha, at nearly fifteen weeks pregnant was kept on life support for almost four weeks against her family's wishes, due to concerns about the Eighth Amendment (Carolan, 2020, online), which guaranteed equal protection of the life of the mother and the unborn (now repealed). To the distress of Natasha's family, her ventilated body began to decay. Fighting to have the somatic care withdrawn and seeking to give

Natasha and her unborn baby a dignified funeral and burial; her family secured High Court orders on December 26th, 2014, ending the somatic support; after the court held the only prospect for the unborn was distress and death. Given the presence of infection in Natasha's deteriorating body, she was described as 'having a rotting brain and open infected head wound, and was buried afterwards in a closed coffin,' (Carolan, 2020, online). Natasha remains very much in the consciousness of our local community, particularly among the women participants in this study, one of whom is Natasha's aunt.

In examining the cultural symbolism and conflicting myths of Ireland's identity as a Catholic country and 'pro-life' nation; and the actions of the state in relations to its obligations as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, McDonnell, and Murphy (2019, p.14) state that:

'In challenging the cultural code of Catholic Ireland, the central moral evaluation was that the Eighth Amendment had failed in terms of its policy intentions and, instead, put women's lives at risk, and the state was identified as the source of the problem that consequently mired legislative action to remedy this problem.'

Whilst Savita's death became a critical marker in the process leading up to a referendum on 25th May 2018 which repealed the Eighth Amendment (Irish Statute Book, 2019); inadequacies in women's health cases still occupy the main position of the inequality of gendering in Ireland. However, evidence of gendering continues to be documented across the media, legal, educational, sociocultural, and legislative structures in Ireland. In their exploration of gendering as a marker of inequality, Cullen and Corcoran (2020) looked at 'how binary notions of 'masculine' and 'feminine', 'women' and 'men' are operationalised and put to work in the form of assumptions, categorisations and representations that pattern social structures and maintain diverse forms of gender inequality' (p. x) [...] 'Raising questions about the historical and contemporary nature of institutional knowledge creation, retention, and control' (p. xxxiii).

Acknowledging that in the past decade, there has been an uprising in the consciousness of gender power relations in the western world; resulting in high profile cases; Cullen and Corcoran (2020) argue that while 'Gender power relations have in recent times been placed centre-stage' and 'Revelations of sexual misconduct has swept through Hollywood, the media more generally, boardrooms and the corridors of power,' (p. xvii); a deeply

ingrained home-grown hybrid of religious, moral, and gendered attitude pervades our framework for living spaces. Further describing this permeation, Cullen, and Corcoran (2020) proclaim that:

[...] while sexual misconduct has erupted into everyday life consciousness demanding a response, it is business as usual elsewhere. The deep structured gender division and forms of gender knowledge that almost imperceptibly frame our institutions, processes and practices remain largely intact (p. xvii).

Gendered social change is happening, as evidenced by the successful repeal of the ban on abortion in Ireland in 2018, (Irish Statute Book, 2019); and an increase in the female candidates for local and European elections in 2019 and the General Election in 2020. However, according to Mariani, Buckley, McGing and Wright, (2020) it has been slow and limited. Underrepresentation of women makes for an unbalanced parliament in politics. In 2019, women represented less than 6% of seats on the local council (McCrave, 2019), while in 2020, Cullen and Corcoran recorded that women make up just 22.5% of parliamentarians.

Gendering in academic circles is also well documented with many high-profile discriminations based on gender cases in Ireland (Boland, 2014). The introduction of The Athena Swan Charter in 2015 is one of the starting measures to tackle and transform gender equality in higher education in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2016). However, for gender equality to be taken seriously across the power structures, progress must be remedied and have a parity across all the gendered outcomes of health, education, political and economic structures.

Cullen and Corcoran's (2020) argue that many women experience intersectional disadvantages, stating:

Slow progress for reparations for women incarcerated in Mother and baby have been made... the continued revelations of paternalism coupled with clear gendered outcomes of marketing health and social care services indicate the limits of policy responsiveness to women's interests in Ireland... Lone parents, working-class women, Traveller women, racial and ethnic minority women, women in direct provision, women with disabilities, and those subjected to violence and assault incur significant and systematic burdens and disadvantages (p. xviii).

For older women who grew up in Ireland, their lived experiences were played out and performed in arenas whose structural powers were reinforced by patriarchy, dominance, and a moral and legislation punitive gendered bias by the state and the Catholic Church.

Presently in Ireland 2023, the latter part of the Decade of Centenaries (2012-2023) is being commemorated. The complexities of the 1921- 1923 period in Ireland's history includes the struggle for independence; a painful civil war; the foundation of the state and partition. Reflecting on the governmentality of our first 100 years of our Free State (December, 1922-2022) heralds an opportunity for the nation to critically unpack the lived experiences of its citizens who have been othered.

This study offered a conduit for older Irish women to voice how they feel about their identity as older women and the timing of this research is significant. The rapidly changing nature of Irish society in the wake of child sexual abuse and trauma inflicted upon unmarried mothers (McAuliffe, 2017) has resulted in a shift in the religious and cultural direction of Irish society.

Creating a new story/life narrative of what it means to be an older woman in Ireland is vital to a societal understanding of older women for further generations. Performing this new story of life narratives through poetry and art provides an opportunity to challenge, unpack, and disrupt the heteronormative socially constructed narrative of what it is to be an older woman in contemporary Ireland.

## 2.8 Reigniting the Fire: Paganism as a conduit of spirituality for older women

In recent decades the exposure of high-profile clerical abuse cases, the abuse and torture of women in the Magdalene Laundries and the high mortality rates and secret mass burials atrocities of the Mother and Baby homes; have signalled the decline of the ubiquitous influence of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland (Flynn, 2022; Fuller, 2017; Maher and O'Brien, 2017; Donnelly, 2016).

According to Kennan (2015) the complex problem of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church can only be understood within the context of contemporary Catholicism when 'it becomes apparent that how the past is investigated and framed is not merely a neutral

matter, but one that is complexity interwoven with present politic and changing social conditions' (p.64). Examining cases of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests in Ireland in her (2012) book *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organisational Culture*; Keenan shone a spotlight on the pervasive culture of silence, secrecy, and denial within the Catholic Church. Investigating why this sexual abuse happened; Keenan (2015), in contrast to overall reliance on individual psychopathology; 'began to inquire into the situational and institutional dimensions of the abuse problem' (p.65). Acknowledging the impact of gender, power, organisational culture, and institutional factors with regards to the problem of sexual abuse of children within the Catholic Church, Keenan argued that the problem developed in a systematic way, beginning with the hegemonic masculinity way of priestly formation. According to Keenan (2015, p.65) 'seminary experience and the ways in which clerical masculinity is fostered and adopted is significant in how this problem comes to be'. Taking into consideration the many structural dimensions, Keenan (2015) asserts that sexual abuse within the Catholic Church is seen as a 'breakdown in relationship of the worst kind, within a gendered context of power relations, organizational culture, theological deliberation, and social conditions' (p.75).

Exposure of the child sexual abuse scandals outraged the public eventually toppling the foundation of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Examining how the child sex abuse scandals broke the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Mullholland's (2019) book *Love's Betrayal: the Decline of the Catholic Church and the Rise of New Religions in Ireland*, also explores how in doing so, it paved the way for the introduction of new religious movements (NRMs), such as Neo-Paganism, to focus on the personal spiritual needs of the individual.

The leading scholar in Irish contemporary Paganism, Jenny Butler (2013) defines Neo-Paganism as an umbrella term for spiritual practices often described as nature-based spirituality, extending into different paths of Neo-Paganism as extending to Druidry, Wicca and Celtic Paganism. Jones and Pennick (1995) describe the spiritual practice of Pagans as having the following characteristics in common; 'they are polytheistic...they view nature as a theophany...they recognise the female divine principle called the Goddess' (p.2) in their book *A History of Pagan Europe*.

Harvey and Hardman (1996, p. xi) record the three basic principles of Paganism as:

1. Love for and Kinship with Nature: rather than a more customary attitude of aggression and domination over Nature; reverence for the life force and its ever-renewing cycles of life and death.
2. The Pagan Ethic: 'Do what thou wilt, but harm none. 'This is a positive morality, not a list of thou-shalt-nots. Everyone is responsible for discovering her own true nature and developing it fully, in harmony with the outer world.
3. The Concept of the Goddess and God: expressions of the Divine reality; an active participation in the cosmic dance of Goddess and God, female, and male, rather than the suppression of either female or the male principle.'

From an international perspective, Manning (2010) identified the fast-growing trend of older women's interest in Paganism. With its roots in the environmental awareness and women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s; Paganism as a religious, spiritual, and social movement focused on earth-centred spirituality and equality and overlaps with feminist ideology to question the way western cultures, and some religions, continue to dominate the Earth and subjugate women. Anthropologist Sabrina Magliocco (2004) described Paganism as the most important folk revival movement since the folk music movement, heralding it as folklore reclamation and intense spiritual experience which remakes and renews the symbols and stories of an abandoned past. Exploring how Neo-Pagans develop a personal spirituality, Magliocco (2012) identifies that personal spirituality is created through their reconnecting with nature, community and the sacred.

From an Irish perspective. factors such as the Catholic Church's perceived male dominant doctrine along with its diminishing power in a secularised Ireland, has led to an increasing interest among women, particularly older women, to the indigenous spiritual ethos of Paganism.

For thousands of years Ireland's indigenous spiritual tradition of Paganism, Celtic spirituality, a nature-based spirituality; operated with a core tenet of ecological philosophy. *In Spirituality in Contemporary Ireland: Manifesting Indigeneity*, Flanagan and O'Sullivan (2016) examines the disruption of the generational long dominant Roman Catholic tradition in contemporary Ireland, and the consequent search initiated by the people for another form of spirituality, a form of spirituality which would make sense of the new societal age of the Anthropocene. Flanagan and O'Sullivan (2016) argue that there is a

resounding need for a meaningful spirituality within the new social context. In their exploration of peoples' return to the nature-based spirituality of Paganism; Flannagan and O' Sullivan identify that returning to ancient indigenous practices of Celtic spirituality can act to feed one's spiritual hunger.

In endeavouring to understanding the role that spirituality can play in this new societal age; Flannagan and O'Sullivan (2016) describe contemporary Irish society as being a society:

Where the form and structures of a long dominant Roman Catholic tradition are becoming less influential and are being resisted, opposed, or rejected by some people. This search—to a greater or lesser extent—seeks to unite a perennial inner yearning with external practices in a new social context. Uniquely, Ireland has an indigenous, spiritual tradition that has a strong ecological core, which is in tune with the spirit of the age. A return to some of the practices of this tradition is proving attractive to many contemporary Irish spiritual seekers (Flannagan and O'Sullivan, 2016, p.55).

Reflecting on similar sociocultural destabilisations of religions, within which, 'mysticism blossomed' (p.55); Flanagan and O'Sullivan (2015) note the 'fragmented and contested religious of a post-Reformation social reality' in sixteenth and seventeenth Spain in which de Certeau's refers to the 'hidden mysticism present in Judaism's historical heritage' (p.55). Highlighting the similarities with Kristeva's identification of 'an allusion to the seven palaces of Jewish mysticism's Sheva Hekalot in the imagery of the Interior Castle,' (p.55); Flannagan and O'Sullivan acknowledge that the relevance of the rising of mysticism during the destruction of established religions for centuries is comparable to what is happening in the religious landscape of contemporary Ireland.

The increased interest in Neo-Paganism, modern-day nature-based or Celtic spirituality in Ireland is significant. Paganism as a nature-based spirituality is central to the Celtic philosophy and to the native system of egalitarian law, Brehon law, which for seven hundred years Ireland practiced, described by Ginnel (1894) as 'the most sacred of the whole social system' (p.216).

O'Beirne Crowe's 1869 paper on Ibero Celtic mythology titled 'Religious Beliefs of the Pagan Irish' confirms the Druidic Pagan religion as being well established during the Celtic period in Ireland. As O'Beirne Crowe stated, 'there can be no doubt that the druidic religion was in a certain manner established in Ireland before, though perhaps not long, before the



coming of Patrick,' (p.309). Interestingly, O'Beirne Crowe emphasised that the Irish Pagans did not worship idols. Noting the importance of the celestial sky, sun, and moon for Irish Pagans, he records; 'the Irish pagan worshipped and invoked, as did all other pagans, the personified powers of nature'; however, they did not worship any idols 'besides the heavenly bodies, they worshipped nothing but pillars stones, remarkable hills, wells and other natural objects,' (p.310). Through his telling of how Tuathal Techtmar, monarch of Ireland, received as pledges from the nation, 'Sun and Moon, and every Power which is in Heaven and on Earth,' (p.310); O'Beirne Crowe reinforces the Irish Pagan belief system of honouring nature.

Butler's (2013) decade-long study investigating the worldview and ritual practices of the Irish Neo-Pagan community is significant in many ways to my study, foremost to the question of identity formation. Central to Butler's study is the use of mythology and how the narrative of mythology translates to identity formation.

According to Butler (2011, p117):

'Irish neo-Paganism is uniquely 'Irish' in many ways: Irish Practitioners empathise with their Irish Pagan Identity, have a special relationship with the Irish landscape and particular sacred sites and local places are chosen as ritual sites. The spiritual connections to place are intertwined with mythology and history and these themes continually appear in Irish neo-Pagan discourse, artistic expression, and material culture.

In *Remembrance of the Ancestors in Contemporary Paganism: Lineage, Identity, and Cultural Belonging in the Irish Context*, Butler's (2015) examines the way the past is conceptualised by Pagans in Ireland to verbalise current identities.

'The ways in which the past is conceptualised or constructed (or re-constructed, or re-imagined) by Pagans is important for their articulation of current identities, both in terms of their cultural uniqueness (as distinct from contemporary Christian cultures, for instance) and their cultural connectedness (to the 'Old Religion', to the land, to ancestors)' (Butler, 2015, p.97).

Irish cultural symbols and artworks and how they are interpreted are also integral to Paganism. Butler (2013) noted how Irish cultural symbols are observed as symbolic

resources utilised in building the character of the Neo-Pagan movement and how through the interconnectedness of the natural landscape and mythology various forms of art-based works are created. 'Irish Paganism is shaped by meaning and symbols which are drawn from the Irish Cultural Repository' (Butler, 2015, p. 197). In a significant cultural turn of the twenty-first century, numerous western women are embracing The Goddess Movement honouring the Divine feminine. Found in the twentieth century (by women, Eller, 2006) because of the combination of women's liberation movements and the interest in the Goddess as female centred spirituality (Starhawk 1999); The Goddess Movement honours the Feminine as Divine by 'making God in their own image' (Nicolae, 2023, p.130). Goddess theocracy refers to a spiritual feminist movement that emerged in the 1960s and organised itself in the 1970s as a reaction to male dominated religions. As a Goddess worshiper, one could theoretically worship any of the Goddesses from all over the world (Christ, 2003). Feminists, anthropologists, academics, and philosophers explored the Goddess concept in the context of an ancient matriarchal culture. Reid Bowen (2007) in his book *Goddess as Nature: Towards a Philosophical Theology*; characterises four concepts that are central to the Goddess Movement, 'deity', 'femaleness', 'nature' and 'politics' (p.24).

In the *Western Rival of the Goddess Movement*, Nicolae (2023) asks the question why is this happening and what does the Goddess Movement hold for women? She argues that images of feminine divinity offer opportunities for women 'to find meaningfulness, empowerment, and sexual or psychological healing' (p. 130) in their lives.

Prior to the twenty century theorists on matriarchy, prehistoric matriarchal Goddess cultures had been examined. Anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen investigated the religious and juridical character of matriarchy in the Ancient World publishing the seminal book *Mother Right*, in 1861. Known for her archaeological and philosophical work on Neolithic culture and religion, Marija Gimbutas posited that European prehistoric culture was female centred and worshipped a Mother Goddess as a giver of life. Based on her documented archaeological findings, Gimbutas published the Goddess trilogy *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1974), *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) and *The Civilisation of the Goddess* (1991). In this she interpreted gynocentric societies as peaceful honoured women who espoused economic equality as opposed to the Kurgan people,

androcratic or male dominated who invaded Europe imposing the hierarchical rule of male warriors.

According to Gimbutas (1991):

The primordial deity for our Palaeolithic and Neolithic ancestors was female, reflecting the sovereignty of motherhood. In fact, there are no images that have been found of a Father God throughout the prehistoric record. Palaeolithic and Neolithic symbols and images cluster around a self-generating Goddess and her basic functions as Giver-of-Life, Wielder-of-Death, and as Regeneratrix (Opus archives and research center, 2022).

Other intellectuals such as the Austrian feminist Bertha Eckstein-Diener (Helen Dinar), was the first to focus on women's cultural history, by undertaking researching feminist history. Her (1930) book *Mothers and Amazons: An Outline of Female Empires* is regarded as a classic study of matriarchy. Other pioneering works include Harding's (1975) feminist perspective works in the field of psychology; Gould Davis (1971) *The First Sex*; and the feminist theologian Stone who collected stories, myths and prayers involving Goddess figures from different religions, publishing *When God was a Woman* in 1971. Goettner Abendroth's seminal book, *Matriarchal Societies*, which explores matriarchal societies in indigenous cultures around the world, offers 'a radical critical analysis of patriarchy, since women are always aliens in the patriarchal system, always invisible, unheard: they are always 'the other' (2012, p. xvii-xix).

One of the foundational texts for my study is Manning's (2010) *An Exploration of Paganism: Aging Women Embracing the Divine Feminine; research* which explored how eight selected women Pagans aged from 43 to 68 years processed and made meaning of their ageing and identity through the spirituality of Paganism. Manning (2010, p. 199) states that 'Gerontology and feminism have overlap and commonalty when considering older women'. Feminist theory and critical gerontology combine in feminist gerontology to question how older women are socially constructed in society. While much of the early feminist researchers focused on highlighting injustices, exposing discriminatory practices: seeking out and exposing sexism there has been a dramatic change over the past 25 years with work in feminist gerontology to refocus and address the narratives of women and power, inequality, class, culture, race, gender and ageing and how to position these

narratives within the saturated mediated arena of youth culture in the western world (Manning, 2010).

In exploring the meaning of life and ageing for women identifying as Pagan; Manning (2010) asked:

How does a specific spiritual orientation of select women shape the social meaning and process of their aging? 'and 'how do older women who identify as Pagan experience growing older, and how does that spiritual identity and practice characterize their understanding of aging? (p.1).

Focusing on empowerment and ecofeminism to better understand the experiences of Pagan women, Manning defines 'empowerment' as a reflection of spiritual strength, acceptance of an ageing self, and embracing being an old woman (2010, p. 199). From a feminist perspective the women participants in Manning's study understood their ageing bodies in relation to the Earth; as ecofeminism recognises the natural synchronisation of women and nature. Using narrative inquiry interviews, three major themes emerged from the study; 'the interconnectedness between acceptance of self through aging, empowerment through spirituality, and nature as a source of the sacred,' (p. 199). Findings indicated enlightenment concerning empowerment and raising of the feminine consciousness. These women were able to embed their experiences of ageing within a unique and specific cultural framework, a spiritual and foundational framework cultivating their authenticity, spiritual strength, and deep connection with nature.

Findings indicated that understanding themselves in the image of the Divine helped the women to 'celebrate themselves especially as ageing women' (Manning, 2010, p.204). Paganism as an identity has given them a 'place to come home to,' 'a place where they can be comfortable in their own Divine skin,' and 'a place where they can be in touch with 'self'' (Manning, 2010, p.204). This empowerment enabled them to reject the trope of the invisible older woman to negotiate 'a way of living and aging that is often neglected in research on aging women' (p. 208).

Manning's (2010) research highlighted 'a potentially unique and relatively unexplored point on the continuum of study within spirituality, religion, feminism, and aging' (p. 196). Identifying that spiritual experience can occur at many levels: physical, cognitive,

emotional, and transpersonal; she stated that 'Feminism and gerontology have the potential to improve the lives of older women by empowering them to embrace and celebrate their experiences of aging, making them a visible faction of our society and culture,' (2010, p. 198).

Mannings' earlier 2004 master's thesis '*A Conscious Evolution: Older women embracing the Divine Feminine*,' had also explored older women's evolution through spiritual empowerment. She states:

Lived experiences provide [...] a refreshing example of the no longer invisible older woman [...] a valuable model for how to organically live the feminist experience, and how to consciously evolve through spiritual empowerment, a living and changing, that welcomes, celebrates, and embraces aging (p.1).

A key finding from Manning's (2010) research indicated that exploring women's ageing within a feminist, gerontological and spiritual paradigm has the potential to empower. Influenced by Manning's approach, my study also explores ageing within a combined feminist, gerontological and spiritual conceptual paradigm.

Another of Manning's studies examined rituals as a conduit to explore women's ageing. In *Experiences from Pagan Women: A Closer Look at Croning Rituals*, Manning (2012) looks at the participating in rituals as a means of exploring ageing for women identifying as Pagan. Utilising semi structured interviews with 10 women aged from 48 to 62, she explored 'the experiences of aging Pagan women with regard to growing older in a way that promotes visibility, acceptance and celebration of aging, and challenges social expectations for an aging woman as absent from the predominant culture,' (p.102). Manning found that through the ritual of croning, these older women can 'understand their aging as celebration, maintain a positive sense of self while aging, and reclaim visibility as aging women' (2012, p. 102).

My study links with the concepts defined in Manning's, in that it too promotes the lived experiences of ageing women by providing a space outside the norm in society, a space in which the visibility, acceptance and celebration of ageing is promoted. However, the women in my study do not identify as Pagan; some do; but others identify as having been

born into, or practicing, other religions. One woman identifies as a Druid, others identify as Catholic, Catholic born, Protestant, Muslim, and various other religions; I would identify as born into Catholicism, now aligning myself with the concept of Celtic nature-based spirituality.

From an American perspective, Manning (2012) argues that women experience ageing in an ageist culture with little semiotics in the mainstream culture for older women to celebrate their ageing. As referred to earlier, from an intersectional perspective, portraying older women negatively in the media doubly marginalises them by age and gender; thus, framing them as other in the arena of life. Spirituality is a broad, multifaceted, multidimensional construct that appears to increase in importance with ageing and may assist older adults in seeking meaning to life and responding to stressful life events (Foley, 2001). For older women, the act of participating in the celebration of crowning ritual, may serve as a propulsion of affirmation to take back their ageing from the confines of a youth celebratory culture.

My study provides for the women to participate in the Festivals of the Seasons celebrations with the aim of utilising the rituals to renegotiate their identity.

Paganism, based on powerfully endowed ritualistic and oral forms of communication, seeks to experience the Divine directly and immediately in the here and now. Through the cultivation of music, dance, costume, chant, and so on, paganism creates an environment whereby the transcendental can be directly channelled through the senses and physically experienced (Albrecht, 2007, p.173).

The healing power of Paganism for some can be transformative. Luhrmann (2012) highlights the healing practice of Paganism through ritual and the intensity of the powerful experiences for Pagans who experience them.

My study provided an opportunity for the women to participate through participative ritual in the Celtic Festivals over the course of a year. A space was created, within which, we as older women, could step outside our socially constructed roles in society, and explore our experiences of ageing through time, space, ritual, and place (May and Thrift, 2001). The

liminality of this layered historic, mythological, geo-gendered space was omnipresent as we entered this world through the festivals, which themselves acted as liminal spaces spiralling within a liminal space. Participating in the rituals and sharing our poetry offered an opportunity for the women to become immersed in the mythological landscape of time, space, ritual, and place. In this space, we were 'neither here nor there;' we were 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, conventional and ceremonial,' (Turner, 1969). Through the collective power of the ritual, a safe space beyond the hegemonic discourse was created by, and for, the women. Here they shared their lived experiences, became part of a *Communitas* of Sisterhood (*Communitas*, according to Turner (1969), provides a framework through which positive experiences and solidarity arise) and began to negotiate and internalise how they felt about their identity as older women.

## 2.9 Migrated older Irish women: straddling the Irish sea, the diaspora struggle, and the fragmentation of leaving

Emigration is an intrinsic part of Ireland's history, particularly after the famine. Approximately 10 million people have emigrated from Ireland since the 1800s with more than 4.5 million men and women between 1850 and 1913 (Hatton and Williamson, 1993). Irish arrivals to America peaked at 1.8 million in 1890, and in 1900 had exceeded 3.3 million (Meany, O'Dowd, and Whelan, 2013). Today there are 36 million ethnic Irish in the USA.

Exploring the reasons for the substantial numbers leaving Ireland during the last century, Kiberd (1995) attributed the reasons to poverty, unemployment, because of the troubles in Northern Ireland; and, as a means of escaping a puritanical Church and state control (Kiberd, 1995). While the main reason for men leaving was one of employment little is known about Irish women who emigrated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, according to Gray (2003) women left in greater numbers than men since the mid nineteenth century and left as single women not as part of a family. Referencing these women who left, Gray (2003) states that the main reason was as a means of escape for over the past century:

[...] women have left Ireland in search of life opportunities, sexual liberation, and career advancement, to give birth and to have abortions, as a means of personal survival and of contributing to the survival of their families in Ireland. They have emigrated to escape difficult family circumstances, heterosexism, Catholicism and the intense familiarities and surveillances that have marked Irish society (p.1).

Half a million Irish women emigrated to England in the mid-20th century. While these women left to be free of the sexual and economic constraints, they were still constrained by their families left behind; also, to provide for their families at home as a 'dutiful familial practice,' (Gray, 2003, p. 2).

It was not until the 1990s, that diaspora studies emerged as an individual research field. Diaspora becoming an interpretative term which could be used to reframe, rethink, reinvent 'identifications beyond the space/time of a nation,' (Gray, 2003, p. 6); enabling the discourse of Irish identity to be 'imagined and reimagined' as 'linear negotiations in costumes of culture' (Sigona et al, 2015, p. xv1)

Informed by poststructural feminist and social theory, Gray (2003) researched gendered approaches to migrancy with the aim of reframing new ways of thinking about Irish women and migrant diaspora. Focusing on the experiences of women who settled in London and Luton in the 1980s, in times of recession, high unemployment and high migration in Ireland; Gray's work explored the lives of those women who stayed and those who left again. Her research with Irish women both in Ireland and in England, asked 'how questions of mobility and stasis are recast along gender, class, racial and generational line;' through the lens of the migrant Irish women and the representation of the 'strong Irish mother' (p. 3).

With reference to the recurring concept of how women were valued in Ireland at that time; Gray (2003) portrays how the indoctrinate patriarchal thinking of Irish women as breeding stock, whose reproductive, sexual and bodily rights; was not only inherently seen as owned by the State, but also, of whose moral purity was of national concern, stating 'until the 1950s at least, women's migration was variously constructed as a loss of national breeding stock, a threat to women's 'purity', and potentially undermining of their national and religious identities' (p.2).



The patriarchal concept of ownership of Irish women, their bodies, their sexual and procreative abilities extended to women in the process of emigrating. In postcolonial Ireland, for women to be leaving, fleeing the country in large numbers, was seen as humiliating for the country, contributing to a sense of failure at a national patriarchal level. Gray's work identifying and capturing Irish women emigrant's life stories set the scene for later academic migrant studies to interrogate older women's experiences of migrancy.

For the purposes of this study, I am interested in scholarship on diaspora for several reasons, including migrant women's lived experiences of ageing; and the complexities of identity formation as older migrant women. In my study two of the women participants emigrated from Ireland to the UK forty years ago; and two other women participants left the UK to live in Ireland over twenty years ago. I also have personal experience as a migrant, having emigrated to the UK in the 1980s returning to Ireland in 2000.

A lacuna exists in the emerging academic scholarship on diaspora, transnationalism, and Irish emigration; there is little evidence of migrant Irish women's lived experiences, ageing as part of the Irish diaspora. Macpherson and Hickman (2016) book *Women and Irish diaspora identities: Theories, concepts and new perspectives* identified that while women featured in writings about emigration; there was still limited recognition attributed to the lived experiences of women migrants and that their narratives were on the margins of migration and diaspora studies.

Aiming to counteract this imbalance, Macpherson, and Hickman (2016) conducted a comparative analysis of Irish women's experience across the globe, from Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, investigated the complexities of the women's lived experience of diaspora in each country, and the key role women played in the construction of diasporic identities.

Éigeartaigh (2009, p. 16), nods to the multiplicities of identities in the contemporary embodiment of the postcolonial. In embracing the multiplicity of potential in between identities and liminal spaces to be inhabited by the Irish diaspora.

McLeod (2000, p. 216) states:

[...] the ability to inhabit liminal spaces and enjoy multiple identities as evidence of the diasporic subject's transcendence of traditional and limiting

narratives of identity. The 'in-between' position of the migrant, and his or her errant, impartial perceptions of the world, have been used as the starting point for creating new, dynamic ways of thinking about identity which go beyond older static models, such as national identity and the notion of 'rootedness.'

Ireland's patriarchal obsession with Irish women's morality extended to women who had emigrated. McCool (2019) notes that for unmarried pregnant women seeking an alternative to the Magdalene homes, 'The archival evidence shows that young pregnant women going to Britain was constant from the 1920s onwards. By the 1950s there was a shorthand term used by social workers in Britain – PFI (pregnant from Ireland) – (pregnant from Ireland),' (online, 2019). Intrigued by the Catholic newspapers' writings about the dangers for Irish women going to Britain, and how they would uphold their moral purity; Redmond (2019) proclaimed 'The moral panic hinged on sex — an Irish obsession with sex when it came to women and their bodies' (online, 2019). stating 'there was so much judgement on these women; there was so much shame; it was all their fault; there was very little compassion' (online, 2019).

Their story is waiting to be told. Out of all other ethnic groups, the 2011 census identified the Irish as having the oldest aged profile in Britain (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Hickman and Ryan (2020) argue that despite 'constituting one of the largest migrant groups, the Irish have been overlooked in most British sociological research on migration and ethnicity,' and 'some researchers have noted this neglect or lack of integration of Irish experiences into the nexus of sociology of migration and ethnic and racial studies' (p. 96) Harte's work (2007, 2017, 2018, 2020) on modern Irish autobiography aims to address the lacuna of older women migrant's lived experiences.

With regards to older Irish women migrants, Breen<sup>1</sup>, a poet, member of Manchester Irish Writers, and a participant in my study, contributed to Harte's (2017) *Something about Home: New writing on Migration and Belonging*. Breen, a migrant of 40 years, tells us she has spent more time in Manchester than she did in Ireland. Her poem 'Crossing Over,' explores her lose sense of time and herself while straddling the dualities of her identity associated with each of the two countries, Ireland, and England:

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<sup>1</sup> Please see <http://manchesteririshwriters.blogspot.com/> for more on Breen

**Crossing over**

One moment here  
One moment there  
Dublin, Manchester  
Manchester, Dublin  
I lose track of who I am  
Momentarily I lose track of me  
(Breen, p.108, in Harte 2017).

Murray (2012) suggests that from a colonial and diasporic perspective, writing offered a way for Irish people to negotiate their identity. Enda O'Brien, one of Ireland's greatest female authors, explored the concept of women's identity and agency within patriarchal Ireland in her writing. Her first three novels, *The Country Girls*, *The Girl with Green Eyes*, and *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, were banned in Ireland (O' Toole, 2002) forcing her into exile in the 1950s.

O'Brien (1976) recounts her leaving from Ireland:

Women are by nature exiles, sometimes it's voluntary exiles. Sometimes you have to leave your own country. But in order to write about something, whatever it may be, there has to be that rupture, that desperate separation, it is in that separation that the depth and profoundness and everything else returns to one (p.5).

The theme of female characters urging to get away from Ireland because of multiple discriminations and dysfunction, is explored in Martin's novel 'More Bread or I'll appear' (1999), providing an insight into the global female diaspora. Reviewing Martin's book, Altuna-García de Salazar (2019) states that 'the discourse of multimodal dysfunction comprising marital failure disintegration, abuse and dislocation shows how a strongly institutionalised Ireland has been unable to contain dysfunction in the period represented' (p.122). The literature conjures up the UK as a site of sanctuary for the migrant women from postcolonial Ireland, a concept yet to be fully explored.

Including the diasporic element in my study, I believe that the perspective of the two women who have been living in England for nearly forty years; and the two English born women who have been living in Ireland for over twenty years, will offer a lens to extend the gerontological discourse of ageing and identity around how they negotiate the complex duplicity of identity as they age.

### 3. Literature Review Identity: Theories of identity (Part 2)

#### 3.1 Older women: Body Image, Ageing, and Identity in a Contemporary Context

The meaning of one's identity is complex; intertwined with one's relationships and interactions with others. Acknowledging that social identity theory involves one's relational interactions, Mansouri (2014) determines that 'individuals define their own identities with regard to social groups and that such identifications work to protect and bolster self-identity,' (p. 1781). Elaborating that our identity is forged through these relations, in what Mansouri (2014) calls relational 'practices of interaction' (p. 2); he states that our identities are not static or fixed, but are fluid 'mutable ongoing productions,' (p. 2).

In concurrence with Woodward's (1999) perspective that the dominant narrative of women's ageing focuses on one of decline: '[f]or women, aging casts its shadow earlier than for men' (p. xiii). Twigg (2004) postulates that this view has been tropified particularly in relation to women's bodies, which have been especially categorised as problematic. In questioning how the ageing female body is performed in mass culture Woodward (2006) notes the conspicuousness of the absence of the ageing female's body in artistic and academic circles and how in discourse concerning the female body 'our implicit and unexamined assumption when we make reference to the body as a category of cultural criticism is that the body is a youthful healthy body' (2006, p.162). However, from a cultural gerontological perspective, there is an increased interest in ageing in the arts and humanities (Twigg and Martin, 2015); situating this interest to the parallel cultural turn in the social sciences and as 'a reaction to poststructuralism and postmodernism,' (Shepley, 2006, p.6).

While western ideals of female attractiveness have long been associated with youth, our understanding of older women's experiences of body image is limited (Hofmeier et al, 2017). Grogan (2008, 2010) attributes body image to an individual's thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and evaluations of his or her own body. Research with ageing women confirms that body issues are a concern, particular to the women's ageing appearance and bodily weight (Hogan and Warren, 2012).

In their USA study with 13 women aged 60-69, Lietchy and Yarnal's (2010):

highlight the influence of interpersonal relationships (e.g., with a spouse or parent), the macroenvironment (e.g., media or community attitudes) and key life events (e.g., physiological changes or educational experiences) that shaped body image at various life stages. In addition, the findings demonstrate that as women age, they de-prioritise appearance in favour of health or internal characteristics (p.1197).

Lietchy and Yarnal's (2010) study highlighted the complexity of body image as a social construction, including attitudes towards their appearance. Findings indicated that as women aged, they were more concerned about their health than their appearance. In Lietchy's later work (2012) exploring body image among retirement-age women, themes such as the participants' definitions of body image, their attitudes about appearance, and their current perceptions of their bodies emerged. Findings from the 2012 study evidenced the complexity of older women's body image with the binary desire for physical change and the existence of contentment.

Hofmeier et al.'s (2017) large scale qualitative study conducted with 1,849 women aged over 50 years, aimed to capture the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes that women at middle age have about their bodies and the experience of ageing. In capturing the complexities of women's lived experiences of the psychological and physical aspects of ageing, four primary themes emerged:

- 1) the physical and psychological experience of ageing
- 2) the injustices, inequalities, and challenges of ageing
- 3) the importance of self-care; and
- 4) a plea for recognition of the need to maintain a contributory role in society (2017, p.3).

Concurring with some of the complexities reported in Liechty and Yarnal's (2010) earlier study; Hofmeier et al.'s (2017) study found that women's experiences of aging and body image was complicated with aging women experiencing unwelcome physical changes while at the same time becoming more appreciative of their physical health and 'more rejecting of societal pressures related to appearance' (p. 4).

In Hofmeier's 2017 study, the theme of physical and psychological experience of ageing was divided into four subthemes: shame versus embrace; practicality; dissatisfaction with physical changes; and functionality focus. Some of the women felt shame about being older, while others embraced their ageing. Dissatisfaction associated with physical changes

that occurred to the body during or after menopause were reported. One of the women reported that 'You wake up one morning, and your face is sagging. You develop an inner tube around your middle that wasn't there before. Your skin turns dry. The earlobes get longer, and the nose gets bigger. Your breasts droop (57 years old),' (Hofmeier, 2017, p.6).

Other dissatisfactions commented on included the loss of sexual desire; the decrease in their metabolism; and how they wish they were better prepared for menopause. 'When my body began to change, I would have appreciated it if my doctor could have prepared me for potential changes to be on the lookout for (56 years old)' (Hofmeier, 2017, p.6.).

Most noted was the lack of information regarding the physical changes during menopause. A consensus revealed that there was a lack of the passing on of intergenerational knowledge regarding one's body changes during menopause.

Discrepancies between the women's chronological age and how they felt about their age was evident. 'All women claimed that they still felt young inside and often experienced shock when they looked in the mirror and saw the reflection of an older woman,' (Hofmeier, 2017, p. 6.). These findings resonate with Featherstone and Hepworth's (1989) seminal concept of one's physical body masking the inner self, the mask of age; and Kaufman's (1994) continuum of self regardless of age, the ageless self.

Complexities and subjectivisms of ageing were evident in the findings from Hofmeier's study. Some of the women described being more grateful for life, more self-accepting in this transition of their lives; others were self-conscious and reported that they still experienced the societal pressures to retain a youthful appearance, thin and attractive with non-grey hair, some opting to undergo surgical procedures to achieve this look.

Commenting on the injustices, inequities, and challenges of ageing, the women spoke about being pressured to look, dress, and act a certain way - to look young, be non-grey, while at the same time having to perform the paradoxical 'act your age.' In concurrence with Twigg and Majima (2014), while it was clear that appearance still mattered for older women, they were still interested in clothing and cosmetics, however, they also reported that the products and services industry were not tailored for older women.

Lived experiences of ageism are endemic throughout Hofmeier's study. Commenting on the derogatory use of language with reference to older women, one 68-year-old participant stated:

There are many linguistic cues as to how poorly our culture thinks of the older woman. Terms such as 'old hag,' 'old cow,' 'pig,' 'bitch,' 'dog,' 'witch' compare a woman to an aged, ugly person or to an animal (68 years old) (Hofmeier, 2017, p. 8).

Using derogatory language to describe older women is endemic in the sociocultural arena. Hofmeier et al.'s findings concur with Shade's (2010) comments that:

The mature woman is often depicted in popular culture as formidable, dreadful, and frightening; and a wide range of derogatory vocabulary is used to describe her – for instance: bitch, witch, harridan, battleaxe, harpy, gorgon, dragon, tartar, old boiler and miserable old cow (p.72).

Overall, findings indicated that the older women felt invisible in society. Commenting on the sense of irrelevance and invisibility that many ageing women experience as they mature, they expressed feeling trapped in a 'not seen and not heard' role (Hofmeier, 2017, p.8). While the women recognised some older women in the media, they made the point that these older women were not realistic portrayals of ageing women; they had been 'commonly doctored to erase visible signs of aging and appear younger,' (2017, p.9) and therefore were not being authentic to their real appearance. Other lamentations included that the women's intelligence, experience, and wisdom 'is no longer considered a valued commodity by corporate America or by the young, (59 years old),' (Hofmeier, 2017, p.9). They expressed their desire to be recognised as valued mentors contributing to society:

We are women, we are sexual beings, we are capable of love and compassion, and we don't want to be checked off because of a few wrinkles or white hair. I have always felt that when your hair turns white you become invisible (78 years old) (Hofmeier, 2017, p.9).

Other findings included dissatisfaction with weight, metabolism, and cognitive adaptations paralleling physical changes particularly during menopause, when women 'often found themselves caught between grieving the loss of their younger body and accepting the changes to their ageing body,' (2017, p.10). Having a healthy and functional physical body became highly valued with advancing age. The women spoke about the importance of self-

care and how, as they got older, valuing being healthy superseded physical appearance. However, it was also noted that 'as women found new ways to value their bodies, they were confronted with devaluation of their bodies by society,' (Hofmeier, 2017, p.10).

Faced with lived experiences which backed up societal devaluation of older women remained challenging. It was evident that the women longed to be noticed, valued, and respected for the contributions they can make. However, concurring with Gullette's (2004) argument that women are aged by culture and Sontag's (1972) concept of the double standard of ageing; this lack of representation of older women in the media negatively intensified the women's feelings of invisibility in society.

With regards to contemporary societal living spaces, the women felt a sense of injustice that acceptance for ageing men in society exists, that men got more respect as they got older; however societal space was not accepting of the ageing women, the societal club is not yet ready to accept ageing women as members. Highlighting a new finding not yet been documented in previous narratives, Hofmeier et al. postulated that 'experiencing the overall aging process as unjust adds to the complexity in women's experience of their bodies and their selves as they mature,' (2017, p. 10). Swinnen, also refers to the unjustness of women being judged as old from menopause onwards as opposed to men. In the western world, where 'women are considered 'old' from menopause onwards while men are not considered old or judged by their age until much later,' (Swinnen and Stotbury, 2012).

Findings from Hofmeier's study confirm that ageing and identity are complex constructs, with both physical and psychological aspects. Societal changes to negate age-related stereotypes about older women should be implemented to 'help women to feel seen, appreciated, and valued, which may reinforce their contribution to society,' (Hofmeier, 2017, p. 11).

Building on the opportunities in Hofmeier et al.'s study for older women to comment on their lived experience of body image, ageing and identity; my study offers an opportunity to restory a new narrative for older women in society, for myself, the other participants and for Irish society.



With regards to the impact of menopause on women's sense of identity, findings from Sergeant and Ritz's (2017) UK biopsychosocial study conducted with eleven women indicated that while most women see menopause as a 'highly significant event in a women's story' (p. 196) marking a transition to another stage in life; the women 'described uncertainty produced by their changing bodies' (p.189).

Interestingly, Sergeant and Ritz (2017) highlight the lack of discourse around women's menopause calling it the 'the unspoken social rule that keeps menopause hidden' (p.189). Attributing the negative dismissive narratives around menopause to this unspoken rule of keeping menopause hidden, Sergeant and Ritz (2017) discuss 'the necessitated renegotiation of women's role and status in the face of menopause narratives questioning women's relevance, vigor, attractiveness and emotional stability' (p. 189). They conclude that while menopause is a continuing period of the renegotiation of a woman's life, it also 'may provide an opportunity for women to refocus on their goals and wellbeing' (p.189).

Each menopause experience is unique. Mishra and Kuh (2012) report that approximately 70% of women will experience hot flashes and night sweats. However, each woman's lived experience incorporates a complexity of their biological, psychological, and sociocultural context.

Traditionally in Ireland, menopause has been shrouded in secrecy, it is something that is just not talked about. According to Brady, Nevin, and Creedon, (2007), despite extensive research on menopause, its symptoms, and psychosocial aspects, little is known about the personal meaning or view on the menopause transition, as experienced by Irish women.

They highlight:

The menopause, the time during which a woman moves from the reproductive to non-reproductive stage of her life, is a unique experience to each individual and its meaning or perspective offers various complexities of human understanding among women. In spite of extensive research on menopausal symptoms and psychosocial aspects, little is known about the personal meaning or view of the menopausal transition as experienced by Irish women (2007, p. 29).

This study offers us a safe place in which women had an opportunity to discuss the uniqueness of every woman's experience of menopause as a natural life event; and in doing so to challenge the stigma which pervades in Irish society.

### 3.2 Ageing body: Postcolonial Identity

Making meaning of identity as ageing woman in Ireland is difficult, in 'a postcolonial space' (Hynes, 2007, p.8). As Gullette (2004) attests 'Our age narratives become our virtual realities' (p. 11). Without a visible presence in society, invisibility is ageing women's virtual reality.

In conceptualising the female body in Irish literature Barros-del Río and Terrazas Gallego (2022) examine the works of Emilie Pine's *Notes to Self* (2019) and Sinéad Gleeson's *Constellations: Reflections from Life* (2019); which reflect on personal traumatic past experiences; and explore the intrarelationship between 'identity, memoir, and narration through the confessional [...] which [...] reconceptualise the body in the Irish context,' (p.1). Using Bamberg's integrative approach of narrative analysis; Barros-del Río and Terrazas Gallego (2022) examine both essays, aiming to illuminate the 'interactional and bodily performed' narratives within the works, as 'testimonies of transformation and adaptation of the body-mediated selves,' (p.1).

Hennessy (2021) argues that although the flourishing of new life writing from Irish women has juxtaposed the Catholic ideology of women's bodies as being 'both the holy untarnished vessel of motherhood and the tainted evidence of carnal sin,' (Online). Acknowledging the inclusion of women's stories on Irish society and identity has 'elevated experiences of motherhood, caring, sexual violence and health, and gender discrimination by political, cultural, and religious institutions;' Hennessy reiterates authors Sinéad Gleeson and Anne Enright views that there remains a significant 'profound deafness to the female voice,' (Online).

The work of Pine and the work of Gleeson around body centred writing 'are a means of coding corporeal experiences with cultural constructions to demonstrate that 'bodies speak, without necessarily talking' (Grosz 2018, p.35) unveiling 'the intimate links between patriarchy and corporeality, power and matter, the nuances of female biology and the psychological, social and political consequences of the female body's (mis)treatment.' (Barros-del Río and Terrazas Gallego, 2022, p.4).

Exploring the body's role within representation, Gleeson's metaphor regarding Irish mothers being 'churched' is 'used to describe the ideal female body within the historical

Irish Catholic State, illustrates the idea of the gendered body and its cleansing ritual in patriarchal society at that time,' (2019, pp.9-10). Gleeson speaks on behalf of the corporeality of the female body suggesting 'women have been shamed for bleeding, encouraged to hide the process and their response to it. Using it as a medium in art is a feminist act of reclamation and confrontation,' (2019, p. 11).

Trauma incurred because of subjugation at the hands of patriarchal systems can be embodied corporeally, somatically, generationally, and transgenerational across time, at a societal and diasporic reach. Atkinson's (2018) research exploring transgenerational trauma (the transmittance of trauma through time) prompted her to coin the word traumarchy to describe how patriarchy perpetuates trauma, explaining it as 'socially structured traumata founded in patriarchy,' (Online, 2018).

In postcolonial Ireland, the female body did not occupy a space of its own. It was deemed sexless (except for procreation); existing within the within; shackled to the forces in which women played out their lives. Wood (2004) attests that 'Sexuality was represented as conterminous with national and religious identity, and subordinate to the strictures of both,' (p.2). In the eyes of the Catholic Church, the female body was a morally bound projected site; a vessel which may, by women's bad choices and immorality; become impure by contamination. The religiosity obsession with women's bodies pressured the involvement of the state to continue its campaign of punitive measures, distrust, othering, denigration, enforcement of invisible incarceration. Thus, women and their bodies remained shackled by the chains of the state.

Up until 1979, Irish law prohibited the importation and sale of contraceptives, legislatively, trapping women's bodies, sexuality, and identity in cyclical procreation. Unshackling women's reproductive rights began with the 1973 case, *McGee V the Attorney General* (McAvoy, 2014), where it was found by the Irish Supreme Court that a constitutional right to marital privacy covered the use of contraceptives. However, this related to married women only and tensions over women's bodies and their reproductive rights continued to be played out between the Catholic Church and the state. The Catholic Church and other strong conservative political forces within society resisted the unequivocal turning point for women in Irish history and several bills failed until 1985, when sale of contraceptives was finally made legal in Ireland.

In 1983 the banning of abortion in most circumstances became enshrined in Article 40.3.3 or the Eighth as it became more commonly known:

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

A landmark Irish supreme court case in 1992, the 'X' Case, involving a fourteen-year-old rape victim who was initially prohibited from traveling to England for an abortion, established the right of Irish women to an abortion if a pregnant woman's life was at risk because of pregnancy, including the risk of suicide. 'Getting the boat to England' was a euphemism for being pregnant and having to leave the country, a phrase which was commonly understood in Irish discourse (Gentlemen, 2019).

In the last decade, influenced by several landmark cases, monumental changes in Irish legislation have signalled the shift in thinking. In 2018, the eighth amendment was unanimously voted to repeal Ireland's constitutional ban on abortions. After Savita Halappanavar's death in 2012, as mentioned above, substantial reform was legislated for such cases by the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 (Irish Statute Book, 2018).

Reproductive rights and the health rights of women are still contentious in contemporary Ireland, and scandals within the medical system with regards to women's health issues continue to the present day. An example of how women and their health is treated with this patriarchal society is the Irish cervical screening controversy (Carswell, 2018). In 2018 Vicky Phelan, a 43-year-old mother diagnosed with cervical cancer, settled a High Court case against a US laboratory contracted to analyse the cervical smear samples. Despite Ms Phelan's doctors, CervicalCheck, and the US laboratory being aware of her misread cervical smears; Ms Phelan was not informed of these findings until 2017:

As Ms. Phelan's story unfolded, 16 other Irish women were notified they also had misread cervical smears, at this point the majority of these women were either undergoing treatment for cervical cancer or had unfortunately already died from the disease (Creed, Walsh, and Foley, 2021, p.6).

Scally's (2018) report on the crisis found cases of 208 women diagnosed with cervical cancer, where original tests had shown all clear. Irish women and their families were

horrified with the devastating lack of regard for women's health. Scally summed up the misogynistic overtones towards women's health stating that the 'findings have cast a shadow on the country's progressive sheen. Behind a humming economy and social liberalisation, endure old habits of dysfunction, unaccountability, and misogyny,' (Carroll, 2019, online).

Judith Butler's foundational feminist work (1990) *Gender Trouble* introduced the theory of performativity which challenged understandings of gender, how gender is constructed through ritualised performances. Butler's later works explored 'not only the means through which performativity manifests but also the potential it creates for individual subversion and collective action,' (Jenkins and Fineman, 2018, p. 157).

Butler argues that performativity is:

[...] such acts, gestures, [and] enactments, construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler, 1990, p.173).

In equating gender identity as a performance (1988, 1990, 1993, 2004, 2010) Butler's performativity theory offers a valuable lens to understand the women participants in my study and their lived experience. Using this lens elicits many questions, e.g., how have our repeated performance of acts, gestures and desires contributed to our identity as aging women in Ireland? How can the prevailing gender norms be changed? And how can the power structures be deconstructed and reconstructed? Subverting gender norms within existing power structures can disrupt and reveal instability in turn, offering opportunities (Butler, 1990) for women to live 'liveable lives' (Butler, 2004, p.207).

For older women in Ireland, my study offered an opportunity for the women to recognise that they are ageing in a postcolonial space, that they consciously or subconsciously, may have internalised the intergenerational narrative of how women were measured by their morality thresholds and valued for their procreation abilities. In *Irishness on the Margins*, Villar-Argáiz (2018) argues of the importance of 'rethinking' nationhood in Ireland by a process of denaturalisation of the supremacy of white heterosexual structures. My study

offers a space in which the postcolonial projection of women's morality as an embodiment of nationhood, has an opportunity to be deconstructed.

### 3.3 Sisterhood and Renegotiation of identity through the Goddess

Social support in life through sisterhood can act as a safety net to provide support and buffer stress. According to Díaz Carrión (2023, p.258) 'sisterhood emerges as a space where women can generate relationships among equals, and (de)construct new resistance identities'...it...'also bonds women's empowerment at the personal and community level'. Fritz Horella (2020) describes sisterhood as groups of women enriching each other in their struggles against patriarchy.

Sisterhood as a theme is prevalent among the rituals of gendered dance performance. Findings from Moe's (2012) exploration of Middle Eastern Dance (AKA belly dance) indicated four emergent themes: healing, sisterhood, spirituality, and empowerment. For many of the participants in Moe's study, belly dancing provided reconnection to their femininity, resulting in emotional-psychological healing, which 'is often gendered in that it is connected to women's identity as women,' (p.212).

Sisterhood is a second wave feminist term, and second wave feminism has been criticised for its homogenising of women, whereas third wave feminism ascribes to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). In my study however, I found it useful to bring the notion of Sisterhood to the concept of intersectionality as this links to the development of *Communitas* by broadening an understanding of fellow feeling amongst women.

Moe (2012) acknowledged the emergence of a sisterhood whereby the women forged connections to each other in the form of social support which is empathetic to the women's efforts. Questioning contested spaces in society for women, Moe asks, 'why such a space is so salient within our contemporary culture,' (p.216); noting that 'the draw to a space that is made up exclusively of women, familiar or unfamiliar, is suggestive of a desire to simply be among others who are supportive and non-judgmental,' (p.215). Consequently, it was the sharing of the communal space with other women which enhanced the attractiveness of the gendered space for women.

In concurrence with Moe's study, my study explores the connection between spiritual activities and rituals. In Moe's study, participating in belly dancing was interpreted by the women as a spiritual activity. Their narratives spoke of the spiritual 'experience of expressing one's beliefs through movement,' (p. 216); of the freedom of body movement, like meditation. The concept of the Goddess was referred to, with belly dancing likened to a ritual. One of the participants in Moe's (2012) study, Obie posts online: 'I also find belly dancing allows me as a Pagan to connect with the Goddess on such a spiritual level; it's like a ritual without the ritual,' (p.216). Spiritual elements of the Goddess were invoked in the women's narratives 'more specifically as Mother Earth, sometimes as representative of the entire universe, and sometimes as an embodiment of the divine feminine in all women,' (p.216). The mystical embodiment of the Goddess was also evoked by participant Emily's posting online, 'I dance in homage to the dakinis, goddess mothers and grandmothers who have danced before, to summon, embody and express the mind-blowingly beautiful rumbling quaking energies of the earth beneath us and the expansive energies above and beyond...' (p.216).

Examining the qualities of the archetypal feminine power, Moe cites Crosby's research (2000) on belly dancing and Goddess worship; stating there is 'little doubt that when women see their bodies as divine, they get a taste of the power which has been the traditional province of men for millennia [...] [they] reclaim their bodies from male profanation,' (Crosby, 2000, p. 169). In their study, the corporeal body was seen as unique. Participant's narratives of empowerment spoke of connection to body as a unique individual, regardless of shape or size, or social expectations; citing the feminine, creative, and transformative energy as having flow, energy circulation and connection to a higher consciousness; which 'increased awareness to a higher power and the connectiveness of all things', and 'spoke to the transformative effects of the dance on a personal level,' (Moe, 2012, p.216).

One of the most important aspects of empowerment that emerged from the narratives in Moe's (2012) study was omnipresence. The impact of what the women gained through meeting, performing, and engaging in sisterhood journeyed with them as their renegotiated sense of self beyond the dance class or performance to integrate into other

realms of their personal and professional lives. 'In other words, what the women gain from belly dancing becomes ingrained or internalized in their perceptions of themselves,' (Moe, 2012, p.216).

Moe (2012) examines the possibility that belly dancing may be considered a feminist leisure activity; proposing that belly dancing provided a sense of community amongst the women, resulting in sisterhood. Against the backdrop of dominant discourse in hegemonic gendered socialisation; their narratives spoke of a support, connection, and bonding within the shared space of the dance class or performance venue; which was exclusively made up of women, some of whom they knew well, others who they had just met. Finally, their narratives spoke of the tremendous joy and increased self-esteem brought to them through their collaborative and collective belly dancing experiences. Dance and movement are important in my study and will be explored more in the analysis chapter to follow.

Reviewing the research regarding the emergence of sisterhood through female belonging collectives or performances indicates a correlation between the emergent sisterhood and the women's renegotiation of their sense of identity. In my study, journeying through ritual and dance in a female collective provided for the emergence of a *Communitas* of Sisterhood in a relational place to explore and renegotiate identity.

## 4. Literature Review Ritual: Time, Landscape and Space (Part 3)

### 4.1 Ageing Temporality Transageing and time

In the western world, time has ubiquitously been colonised as a hegemonic linear clock-time. Patriarchal socially constructed linear time diverges completely in contrast with cyclical time, a concept of time influenced by the repeated patterns and cycles in the natural world.

Through exploration of the temporal dimensions of women's ageing, it is acknowledged that time is understood and experienced differently by women. Feminist researchers suggest that cyclical time which includes 'processes, movements, vibrations, returns, and



rotations,' (Vojcic, 2014, p. 88) reflects women's lives more deeply than linear time (Hughes, 2002, p. 142).

According to the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, clock-time or linear time acts as 'a reductive measure of temporal comprehension, just as Cartesian geometry represents a reductive understanding of space' (Lefebvre 2004, xi). Lefebvre's discussions on time and lived experiences focuses on the rhythms which evolve from intersecting time, place, and energy. Lefebvre (2004, p.15) notes that 'everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm.'

In the 1980s, the spatial turn in the humanities and social science reflected upon the representation of time, space and place in literature and various multidisciplinary scholarship (Mulligan, 2019). May and Thrift (2003) conceptualised the theoretical framework of TimeSpace as 'a multiplicity of space times,' (p.4); where four interrelated domains of how time is shaped are defined:

1. by our responses to the natural rhythms within nature, the seasons, and our internal biological rhythms
2. by social discipline such as work or family time
3. by our relationships with technology
4. and by our sense of time in relation to texts, books, art, and images (p.4).

How we individually experience time is different; relative to our emotions towards ageing, and chronological linear time, which is never stable or inert, is always moving forward and in a space and place. Kairotic felt time is experiential, Kairos being 'an exemplary temporal point [...] the invention of being on the edge of time,' (Negri, 2004, p. 104); of lived time interchangeable past, present, and future. Moglenian transageing time can be experienced by which 'multiple self-states of past, present are available for recognition and enactment,' (Moglen, 2008, p.297).

The complexity of how time is somatically and cognitively experienced is related to the understanding of our identity. May and Thrift (2001) emphasise how we experience time on an emotional level is conditional to the individual's identity and perception. Rovelli (2019) concurs with our experience of time being conditional to our identity, stating 'the mystery of time intersects with the mystery of our personal identity, with the mystery of consciousness,' (p.172).

In *The Concept of Time*, Heidegger (1992) defines chronological time as measurable time, such as clock time, a pure linear homogeneity, a time which is measurable, calculable, countable from the beginning to the end. However, the use of chronological time to measure our lives is a new phenomenon, arising from the industrial revolution's commodification of measuring how fast people could work within a certain chronological period. Prior to the industrial revolution in the middle of the eighteenth century, time was considered and viewed in a variety of diverse ways. Time was experienced as cyclical - in tune with nature, sunrise, and sunset, the turning of the seasons, daylight, and the stars at night. The introduction of the linear chronological measurable lens of clock time disrupted how time was viewed and measured, how people (and animals) lived in relation to the management of time; and how people viewed and experienced their lives. The 19<sup>th</sup> century chronos model of linear time became the dominant model in the western world.

Newton overturned less fixed notions of time such as Kairos (the right or opportune moment to do something in time) (Delahaye, 2016) and Augustinian time, Einstein's (1905) special theory of relativity completely overturned the concept of time and space as absolute (Newtonian); immortalising that time and space were, what cultural geographers May and Thrift state as 'irrevocably tied in a relative and four-dimensional space-time,' (2003, p.11).

These categorizations of time, however, are purely from a western perspective and do not include how indigenous people, such as the Maoris, view, and live with time; and how they experience dreamtime. Indigenous populations' relationship with time is often fluid and nonlinear. As far back as 1982, Walker stated that 'Māori time' is a fluid interactional space where '[m]easured time becomes meaningless as the values relating to people, discussion and the arrival of consensus takes over,' (p. 59). The temporal flows and currents which exist in 'Māori time' cross the linear boundaries of past, present, and future time, connecting rituals, people (living and ancestral), land and spirituality.

In Kidman et al.'s (2021) study, the interconnectedness of Māori space-time or Wā is discussed:

In Māori cosmology, space-time or Wā is framed as a spiral of temporal flows, eddies and currents that exist in a multi-dimensional matrix

(Salmond 2017). These temporal flows are intimately connected to tribal geographies. Past, present and future do not simply share common borders, they operate contemporaneously in unbounded space. Wā is therefore the realm of connection between people (both living and dead), the land and the invisible and spiritual spheres that stretch across a vast, unbounded totality in which times past, present and future are coterminous (p. 25).

Other cultures have identified with this concept of time and pace fluidity. In comparison to the Fijian relaxing attitude and value to time, Eräsaari identifies that 'the European version of clock time has been obsessed with pace from the outset,' (2018, p. 407). Past, present, and future times have also been interpreted in diverse ways. The Sami people of Northern Sweden do not ascribe chronological time to past events. Bergman (2006) suggests that 'the indigenous Sami concept of time, life and death implies that distances in the past were not ascribed any significant value and that there was no chronological or genealogical scale against which events in the past were measured,' (p. 151).

In Celtic and pre-Celtic culture, the concept of time was understood as cyclical. Gentle (2009) explored what was understood at certain thresholds of time, such as Bealtaine and Samhain, when the veil of life between worlds was thin and one could easily slip into the Otherworld. Borders between lands, ditches, lakes, fairy rings and doorways into houses, were also recognised as thresholds to the Otherworld.

Time as a social construct can be radicalised, reconfigured, and rewritten by those who have power and agency. Using a postcolonial lens to interrogate lands, such as settler colonial lands which have been subject to invasion and deterritorialisation, the arrangement, restructuring and reconfiguration of time itself has become a chronopolitical (Klinke, 2013) concept.

In relation to the colonial settler lands of Australia, the legacies of colonial invasion and deterritorialisation continues to impact the indigenous people (Kidman et al. 2021). In the context of place-based violence, time itself can become 'radicalized and reconfigured' (Kidman et al., 2021, p.24). Comparable to the history of a country being eradicated from record, time itself can be used as a resource to be remodelled or shaped by those who hold power and agency. '[But] just as land and place are subject to settler colonial 'rewriting' by

the marginalisation or erasure of indigenous claims to territory, time is also racialised and radically reconfigured by these manoeuvres,' Kidman et al. 2021, p. 24).

From a gerontological perspective of women's ageing, Segal (2017, p. 174) points to the 'complicated relationship' between women and linear time. The interrogation of models of time such as Crowther et al.'s (2012) concept of experiential 'felt time' (p. 2); and Baars (2012) tri-simultaneous, tri-relational past, present and future time; challenge the neoliberal model of ageing as one of decline and despair (Jennings and Krainitzki 2015); while also 'have proved instructive when approaching concepts of age,' (Baars 2012a. p. 181).

Jennings' (2017) research examining women's ageing and identity formation in the contextual culture and society of time and space through the television dramas *Tenko* (BBC, 1981-84) in the 1980s, and thirty years later *Call the Midwife* (BBC, 2012-present) provide insight into female experiences, divisions and the 'relationship between women, ageing and understandings of women's identity over time' (p. 179). Jennings asserts both liminal spaces of *Tenko's* prison and *Call the Midwife's* become examples of May and Thrift's (2003) TimeSpaces.

However, while fictional spaces within drama, film and literature have the potential to semiotically offer an insight into how identity may be negotiated and renegotiated in liminal spaces; in contemporary western societies, not only do 'notions of age and generation embed identities within restrictive linear and normative chronologies' (Jennings, 2017,p.3); they reinforce the silofication of the identity of ageing women in organisational societal culture as one of being outside of the homogeneous, outside of what is valued in the ecosystem of society.

Using a gendered ageing studies lens and building on Jennings and Krainitzki's (2015) research in relation to time, ageing and identity; the question remains as to how can the hegemonic paradigm of ageing be deconstructed as a narrative of decline and/or a lack of positive representation (Woodward 2006)? and how can it be restructured to be socioculturally recognised as the spectrum of a lifecourse complexity of lived experiences, including, as Moglen (2008) and Segal (2013) suggests, the concept of experiencing being both young and old simultaneously?

Baars (2012) distinguishes the chromatic dimension of ageing as one dimension but argues that there are many and 'these issues deserve a broader and deeper temporal understanding,' (Baars, 2012b, p. 148). In concurrence, Grenier states that 'transitions and events are threaded throughout the lifecourse and into later life,' (2012, p.3). The lifecourse is a key concept in gerontology 'popular for being both a sociological entry point into research on ageing and for broadening such research beyond earlier biological, psychological and evolutionary models of human development,' (Grenier, 2012, p.6).

An individual's experience of ageing is as unique as their perspective of their lived experiences, interactions, relationships, and memories and how they embodied their unique transitions and events along the lifecourse. Lived and relational experiences played out in the shadow of patriarchal societal norms, have the propensity to become internalised as a frame of reference of supposititious identity. In other words, lived experiences through time impact our understanding of self-identity, who we are as an actor, how we perform, or how we believe society believes we should perform (Butler, 1998).

As we age, and as we are categorised by age (Gullette, 2004), in sociocultural, political, and economic terms through the implementation of policies; we continue to negotiate our identity across the lifecourse and across intersectional factors which impact ageing. These factors include health, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, by relational practices. Grenier (2012, p.3) states 'the models by which we understand and make sense of our lifecourse, and our ageing exist and are enacted through socio-cultural, relational and personal processes.'

Baars and Phillison (2014) postulates that narrative is crucial to understandings one's lived experiences over time, highlighting that 'not only are narratives needed to relate chronometric time to the world, but they are also crucial to interrelate the dimensions of lived time: the past, the present and the future,' (2012a.p.1). Moreover Katz's (2005) concept of the lifecourse alongside Gilleard and Higgs' formation of old age as a cultural imaginary (2021), suggests that time is fluid as Moglen's (2008) concept of transageing suggests. In my study, through the exploration of the spaces and places of the Celtic rituals, these concepts are brought together to analyse contemporary older Irish women's identities.

From a feminist postcolonial lens, the patriarchy in Ireland post-independence had annihilated the image of Irish women as feminists, revolutionaries, freedom fighters, equal members of society, and refashioned the image of the Irish woman into a subordinate, lesser equal member of society, with a value measured with being married and motherhood. Paradoxically once Ireland became independent, rights for women regressed; and for almost 100 years while the country was trajectoring in time; the timesphere of equal rights for women travelled anticlockwise, in a backwards unattainable fashion.

The concept of Celtic Festivals' time as a TimeSpace outside patriarchal linear time and space, aligns with the fluidity and non-linearisation of Māori cosmology; space-time or Wā, Fijian and Sami time. Celtic Festivals' time has the potential, particularly for women, to be a cyclical non-linear time of transformation with access to the Otherworld. Mary Daly (1973) describes that for women, the moving out of patriarchal linear time towards feminine time can be transformational proclaiming that 'for women entrance into our own space and time is another way of expressing integrity and transformation. [...] When women move out of patriarchal space and time, there is a surge of new life,' (1973, p. 43).

With reference to May and Thrift's concept of TimeSpace as explored above, similarly, the spatially oriented geofeminist (Mulligan, 2019) context of my study created a liminal space (May and Thrift, 2001; Massey, 1992), exclusive of the heteronormative world. The contextuality of journeying at Uisneach, a sacred landscape known for its liminality and nonlinear qualities, provided a time and space outside the patriarchal linear time.

Within this TimeSpace, through the yearlong rituals of the Festivals, the women explored their ageing; their identity formation through time and space; and their identity formation and performance. Stepping off the edge into a space devoid of the socially constructed expectations; the women stepped into another space and time where societal and cultural norms that define older women have yet to be formed. Within this TimeSpace, we created our own identity script as ageing women.

#### 4.2 Performing ageing and embodying the Goddess through ritual

Christianity in Ireland is said to have been established with the arrival of St Patrick in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. However, it took several generations of proselytising by Christian missionaries to establish Christianity as the main religion in Ireland. Textual evidence exists that Pagan

secular rituals survived into the medieval period. Bhreatneach (2015) refers to the two religions coexisting in the same period in Ireland, noting that 'it is possible to identify genuine non-Christian religious practices and practitioners' through the archaeological evidence (pp. 130-131).

Williams (2016) notes that high status individuals had probably stopped publicly worshipping the Pagan gods and Goddesses at the turn of the eighth century 'druids—the magico-religious specialists of Irish paganism—finally cease to appear in legal texts as a going concern and can be taken to have disappeared from Irish society,' (Williams, 2016, p.4.). Nevertheless, Williams also points out that these markers are public and collective, and we don't have access to how the people felt at the time, stating 'how people behaved in their homes and felt in their hearts— is irrecoverably lost to us,' (p.4).

Interestingly, occasional manifestations of non-Christian religions continued to appear until the turn of the eighth century in the old Irish format 'pagan divinities began to appear in a vibrant literature,' (Williams, 2014, p.p. 4-5). Bhreathnach (2015) also acknowledged the parallel existence of Christian and non-Christian religions existing at the same time in Ireland. Concurring with this textual appearance of non-Christian religions is archaeological evidence from which 'it is possible to identify genuine non-Christian religious practices and practitioners,' (Williams, 2014, p.p.130-131). The folklore of Irish mythology documented in the early Christian writings by the monks in the 7<sup>th</sup> century accredited the Goddess as a representation of the land. Thus, cementing its symbolism in Irish mythology as a powerful cultural influence in Irish agrarian society.

To assimilate the Pagan traditions of the Celtic religion still being practiced in Ireland into the Catholic realm; Catholicism simply rebranded the powerful Pagan Goddess Brigid to become Saint Brigid, the patron saint of Ireland. Medieval art historian Berger argues that the Christian monks 'took the ancient figure of the mother goddess and grafted her name and functions onto her Christian counterpart,' (Berger, 1985, p.73). Reflecting 'an old belief that the land itself is feminine and its most powerful spirits are female,' (Roberts, 2016, p.9); Ireland itself was named after the Goddess Ériu, the sovereign Goddess of Ireland. Ériu, the Earth Mother, one of the triplicities of goddesses - Fodla, Banba and Ériu of the Tuatha De Danann (the people of Dana), personified the land of Ireland. Folklore narratives of the Goddesses, such as Danu, Éiru, Áine, Airmed, Anu, Badb, Banba, Bóinn, Brighid,

Clíodhna, Étain, Fand, Fotla Macha, Nemain and The Morrigan, encapsulate this significance of honouring the land, nature, and the animals to ensure fertility of all. Another important Celtic Goddess is Danu. Originating as Danae the Goddess of agriculture in Crete and Argos and adopted by the Indo-European Celts who called themselves Tuatha De Danann (the people of Dana), the Goddess Dana or Danu is recorded as the primeval Earth Goddess and Mother of Gods and People in Ireland (Gottner-Abendroth, 1995).

Aligning with the sacred number three representing the mystic number of the trinity; Danu symbolises the matriarchal trilogy of the Mistress of Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld. Danu 'is the land of Éire itself' in possession of a cauldron of inspiration that 'symbolises the powers of her inexhaustible fertility, healing, re-awakening, and 'enthusiasm', or creative energy,' (Gottner-Abendroth, 1995, p.96). The ancient symbol of the triskelion, or Tri-Spiral design engraved on one of the stones inside the chamber at Newgrange in the Boyne Valley is none other than the Pagan 'cycle of eternal return,' birth, life, and death. This is represented in the triplicity of the Celtic Goddesses, a sister or virgin, a nature Goddess or lover and a Dark Mother; maiden, mother, and crone (Stevens and McClaren, 2007, p.31) - the triskelion is the gynocentric symbol of the Goddess. The triskelion has many interpretations, it can represent the three worlds, the present world, the ancestral spirit world and the celestial world of the sun, moon, stars, and planets. As all three spirals appear to be moving outwards from the centre, it is said to represent movement or motion, cycles of action which is energy.

Archaeologist Gimbutas's *Goddess Trilogy* (1974, 1989, 1991) provides an insight of the woman centred (gynocentric) nature and Goddess worship cultures of the old European system, which predated the bronze age patriarchal (androcentric) culture. Using comparative mythology, folklore, and images of symbolic artefacts, such as figurines, sculptures, vases, and sacrificial containers; Gimbutas demonstrates that Goddess worship underpinned the historiography of Western civilisation.

Although it has long been recognised that the Goddess figurine symbolised fertility, recent archaeological discoveries have suggested that Goddess figurines representing elderly women may symbolise elevated status in that society. Archaeological evidence of Goddess figurines common in the Neolithic period, have been discovered throughout southeast Europe and the Middle East.



In 2016 a rare Goddess figurine of an elderly woman was excavated in Catalhoyuk, central Turkey, by Hodder's archaeological team from Stanford. Thought to be 8000 years old, this figurine of a woman with her hair tied in a bun, plump, with sagging breasts and a pronounced belly, symbolised her maturity and elevated status (Kark, 2016); providing a representation of an elderly woman who had risen to prominence in Catalhoyuk's famously egalitarian ancestral society, Thus validating ancestral feminist values of equality for older women in society.

Influenced by 'postmodern resistance to metanarrative and hegemony,' (Wallis and Blain, 2003, p.307) post-processual archaeology now centres multidisciplinary narratives in interpreting archaeological remains and sacred sites, including the use of folklore. Focusing on sites and landscapes Paphitis (2019) highlights the potential of folklore in understanding and participating in public archaeology.

According to Mangan (2022), in Ireland, stories and myths have been kept alive by the poets, seers and druids, which 'anthropologists are finding increasing evidence that there is truth there too, just as indigenous tales from other cultures are now being found to contain knowledge stretching back thousands of years,' (pp.2-3).

Engaging with archaeology in several ways, contemporary Pagans draw on traditional understandings of sacred sites in the construction of their own narrative of making meaning and identity. Wallis and Blain (2003) suggest 'specific rooted folkloric narratives are increasingly informing how people relate to places and spirits of place, and how they understand themselves and construct meaning and identity in the interaction of self, spirit and site,' (p.308). One strand of contemporary Paganism, Eco Paganism, utilises feminism and political ecology as a way of being in the world. Asserting that capitalism is underpinned by patriarchal values, the ecofeminist philosophy aims to understand relationships between humans and the natural world, through the concept of gender (McGregor, 2006).

Goddess feminism emerged as an emancipatory religion 'premised on the necessity of a collective moral confrontation with patriarchy and the planetary injustice and suffering it causes,' (Raphael, 2011, p.133). In 1979 Starhawk a seminal Ecofeminist and Pagan, published *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* which,

in its combination of spiritual feminism and the Goddess movement, seeded the reclaiming movement, honouring the ancestors and rebirth. Later in 1979, Starhawk and Diane Baker founded *Reclaiming, of the Goddess Movement* underpinned by feminism and political activism, explored and developed feminist contemporary Pagan emancipatory rituals. In one of the first major studies of the Reclaiming Witch community, Salomonsen (2002) examined how communal and ritual practices of Reclaiming had the potential to promote personal growth and transformation.

Another way of knowing in Eco-Paganism is termed embodied knowing. As Albrecht identified (2007, p.191) 'Paganism, by its nature, deals with the sensual world around us and within us, immediately present and experienced directly through the widespread incorporation of all the senses'. Questioning the role of embodied knowing in Paganism, Harris's (2008) study explored embodied knowing (embodied cognition) as another way of knowing in Eco-Paganism. Findings indicated a connection between Eco-Paganism, embodied knowing and activism with a key finding indicating that Eco-Pagans think with place.

According to Harris, Eco-Pagans often intentionally:

[...] think with place paying more attention to embodied knowing than most people. An Eco-Pagan's practice inspires and feeds both their spirituality and their motivation to be activists. Because embodied situated cognition is fundamental it is a more powerful motivator than what we can usefully call propositional or explicit knowing (Harris, 2008, p. 19).

Rituals provide a liminal theatre where the performance of embodied, cognitive, and somatic has an opportunity to be realised. Harris and NightMare (2006) note the potential impact of the performative element of rituals:

A Neopagan ritual is a process played out through performance. It is set apart from the mundane and involves physical activity and symbolic verbal or non-verbal communication expressed through multiple sensory modalities. Some Neopagan ritual intends to engage with 'ultimate reality' or mystical powers and takes place in the context of a heightened emotional state (Harris and NightMare 2006, p. 217)

Concurring with Harris and NightMare's (2006) acknowledgment of the performative element, Ezzy (2011) argues that rituals provide:

[...] an etiquette of relating to, thinking through, and emotionally responding to events and experiences that are otherwise difficult to deal with. Rituals work through embodied performances that are bound up with cultures of cognitive and somatic knowing. Ritual experiences allow participants to develop life-enhancing responses to some of the central challenges of contemporary life (p.245).

Rites of passage performed through ritual initiation would have had multiple social and economic functions in life. Bhreatneach (2014) refers to several important rituals, rites of passage of birth, initiation, puberty, death, rebirth, and burial (pp. 132-147). Bhreatneach suggests that the sites of wells and springs associated with the rituals honouring the Gods and Goddesses of Celtic Paganism became sites of baptism in the Catholic religion. Albrecht's research into Pagan and Roman Catholic symbolism found that Pagan symbols and practices exist within contemporary Roman Catholicism. He states that: 'despite historic efforts by the literate elite to purge remnants of pagan ritual from the liturgy, pagan symbols and practices still vibrate with intensity and popular appeal within the very belly of contemporary Roman Catholicism' (2007, p. 174).

Over thirty years ago, Greer (1991) lamented the lack of ritual in society to celebrate menopause. Affirming that every woman should be aware of the unconscious happenings of menopause, Greer posits that women devise their own way to mark the change:

Though there is no public rite of passage for the woman approaching the end of her reproductive years, there is evidence that women devise their own private ways of marking the irrevocability of the change. Part of the mythology is that there are women who experience nothing significant at this time, which if it were true would be lamentable, for the goal of life is not to feel nothing, the climacteric (menopause) is a time of stocktaking, of spiritual as well of physical change, it would be a pity to be unconscious of it (Greer, 1991, p. 3).

Greer (1991) referenced the fifty-year-old Marquise de La Tour du Pin acquisition of a notebook and writing her autobiography as 'a DIY ritual to mark the otherwise unmarked transition' to menopause,' (p. 36) in her chapter 'No Rite of Passage' in *The Change*. She argued:

There is no rite of passage to surround the middle-aged woman with solemnity, no seclusion for her, no special periods of rest. She cannot withdraw to a menopause hut and sit and talk to other menopausal women. She simply has to tough it out and pretend that nothing is happening (1991, p. 39).

Rituals have the capacity to disrupt, to communicate messages and to offer opportunities for transformational change. In exploring performance as ritual, DeMarrais (2014) notes that:

Performance theorists generally agree that performances are evocative, often dramatic, and sometimes mysterious in their content and symbolism. These evocative qualities, along with the capacity to disrupt routines and to capture and hold the attention of audiences, mean that performances and spectacles are particularly well-suited for communicating messages about power and hierarchy. Yet...performances may also be settings where negotiation, competition, contestation, or transformation of existing social orders becomes possible (p.161).



*Figure 1: Photo Nicole McKenna (2016) The Bog Queen Immersion Project: Transformation Through Contemplative Immersion*

As a performance artist in exploration of my own ageing, in 2016, I immersed into the peaty bog waters of the midlands bog, and in doing so, stripped away the social construction of

what society determines an older woman should be (see Figure 1 above). By performing the ritual of washing myself in the rich peaty waters, the hegemonic narrative of the ageing woman was disrupted. Utilising the mythological mantle of the Earth Goddess buried beneath the layers of patriarchal subjugation; the Bog Queen was embodied and reclaimed. 'In feminist and performance praxis, bodies play a central role – material bodies, performing bodies, social bodies, bodies on display, on the line, becoming embodied through our performances of embodiments,' (Swafford, 2022, p. 4).

Exploring this embodiment of the Goddess through ritual as an older woman, Coyle, and McKenna's (2017) art praxis research, 'The Bog Queen Immersion Project: Transformation Through Contemplative Immersion,' refers to Heaney's Earth Goddess and the reclamation of women. Our work explores Heaney's (1975) Bog Queen which 'establishes the figure of an Earth Goddess that works as metaphor for the reclamation of woman / Mother Ireland who is buried beneath layers of social conditioning / troubled histories,' (Coyle and McKenna, 2017, p.43).

In Coyle and McKenna's Bog Queen video (which is a performance precursor of The Bog Queen Immersion Project), the social construction of older women in Irish society is explored through immersion in bog pools and poetry. The physical performance of immersing in the bog pool acted as a transformative catharsis act of purification, 'From a spatial humanities perspective, the exploration of older woman immersed in bog and poetry, offers us a schema to make meaning of the social construction of older women in Irish society,' (p.43).

In my study, the taking on of the mythological mantle of Ériu, the sovereign Goddess of Ireland has the potential to empower older women; together and individually; to negotiate the conflicting discourses of aging and identity present in our mediated culture. By journeying through this feminist mythological landscape, the potential to intrinsically internalise a physical, spiritual, and psychological authentication of our own natural and artistic beauty as older women can be realised and subsequently filtered into the societal psyche.

### 4.3 Contested spaces and safe spaces for ageing women: The Liminal Space of Landscape mythology

While the dominant narrative of older women constitutes a microcosm of invisibility and lack of agency; Greer (2017) appealed to society to generate spaces wherein a woman 'could give an account of her own strategy for coping with old age,' (p. 325). Twigg and Martin (2015) highlighted the gerontological analysis of space and place, particular to women and the home. 'Within cultural gerontology, there is renewed interest in the analysis of space and place, especially through work on the cultural and meaning of home and on the changing significances of public space,' (Twigg and Martin, 2015, p.356).

Historically, women in Ireland were legislatively and religiously situated within the home space. Nash stated that 'the fluid relationship between the seemingly private, domestic space of the home and the public symbol of the nation as family (Mother Ireland) has indeed worked to locate women within a particular social and cultural space,' (Nash, p.54).

The concept of women moving beyond the situated home space to created spaces is explored in Altay and Clarke's (2019) paper which examines how Kurdish women create sacred space through embodied mystical practices. Exploring how 'women forge feminine connections to the divine even within historically male-dominated religious traditions, whether by rewriting religious narrative or cultivating women-centred practices' (p.5); Altay and Clarke (2019) argue that for the largely marginalised experiences of Kurdish women; embodying mystical practices creates space within the heteronormative dominant power structures; which in itself 'constitutes a form of female agency and subject formation [...] The sacred space forms the feminine subject and constitutes an act of feminine agency,' (p.1).

In my study, Uisneach's landscape mythology (the cultural memory of the landscape (DeRung, 2000) acts as a gynocentric space, providing a contextual landscape canvas in which the metaphoric, mythological, and geographical cultural memory of the landscape, integral to its understanding, combines in a betwixt and between, Turner's (1969) liminal and Moglen's (2008) transageing in the past, present and future; portal of awakening space.

In *Listen to the Land Speak* Mangan (2022, p. viii) refers to the landscape as:

a mnemonic, an arrangement of natural and physical elements that help us remember things that are often far greater than the landscape itself. That is not to say that the geographical features are not vital, but as well as being profound and potent in and of themselves, they are vessels for the history, beliefs, and culture of our people, going back thousands of years.

Mangan also theorises on the bending and doubling back of time and physical reality through myth and landscape; particularly in the 'profoundly fractal nature of the Irish landscape' (2022, p. 3). Mangan observes that:

for those of us who have been reared on simplistic narratives and linear timelines...On our journey through myth and landscape, you'll find yourself entering a maze in which physical reality warps and winds back on itself, with different themes and locations melding and dividing, seemingly on a whim.

As Ireland's central geographical point, Uisneach is the embodiment of ancient ritual, celebration, and ceremony. Known as the Fire Eye of Ireland whose fire is the first to be lit in Ireland at Bealtaine; is mythologically metaphorised as the flame which all the other fires are to be lit from. The annual gathering at Uisneach for the Festival of Bealtaine is the rekindling of an ancient tradition recorded in Keating's (1634) *History of Ireland*. According to Dames (2000):

Celebrating Bealtaine and the beginning of Summer, a great assembly was held on the hill of Uisneach and only when the Uisneach Fire was lit, would fires be lit on surrounding hills and then across the whole of Ireland, uniting people across the land and allowing the Goddess Ériu to see her people through her 'Fire Eye,' (p.194-195).

The royal seat of Uisneach was also important as a political and law-making centre. As noted earlier, in Pagan times, in dual recognition and respect of the Goddess Ériu as the embodiment of the land; it was customary for the claimant to the high throne of Ireland to 'marry' Ériu at Uisneach; metaphorically marrying the King to the land, the provider of food and thus, the provider of life. It was also here at Uisneach where the national legislature assembly met to discuss Brehon Law, the oldest surviving codified legal system in Europe; recorded in the Annals of Ulster, the *Senchas Már*, as commencing in 438 A.D., and operational up until the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Playwright Marina Carr, whose plays reflect the liminal status of Ireland itself poised between postcolonial and postmodern; says of Uisneach, 'I think it's no accident that it is

called the midlands, for me, it has become the crossroads between the worlds,' (Gladwin, 2011, p.394).

#### 4.4 Ageing in the landscape, and in and out of place

In Ireland, place and localities' place names are intertwined to the topography of landscape through story, mythology, history, and tradition, as to what happened there in that place, what characters or events in cultural memory are associated with that place and what exactly that place or place name means. Schlüter (2017, p. 25) states that without the story, the landscape would be just a space; it is the 'topo-mythography' which 'emphasizes the connection between myth, the past, and place', and the dindshenchas, meaning the 'lore of a place' which operates as 'a medium between story and landscape. The landscape itself contains the layers of memories as well as layers of rock.

In the landscape of the Irish midlands, the women and I are ageing in, and with, the 'topo-mythography,'; the dindshenchas, of raised bog wetland, compressed over hundreds of thousands of years to form a spongy terrain. Synonymous with the midlands, this landscape of deep specimen raised bogs, which occupied former lakes in the landscape, were formed by masses of organic, vegetative, partially decayed sphagnum moss, which had 'accumulated in annual cycle [...] in the anaerobic waterlogged environment,' (Bord na Mona, 2021, online).

I visualise the bog as acting as a liminal repository space of our culture, heritage, memories, secrets and lived experiences. Generations of families have worked the bog, our parents, grandparents, and some of the women, including myself, have worked the bog drawing, stacking, and collecting the black sods of turf to burn as fuel. As children we walked through the marshy geographical and ecological bog land, bog cotton, flora, and fauna. As older women we inhabit this wetland landscape, we live in its space, most of us have had an experiential relationship with it; we are ageing in and with, the layering down of layers of experiential ageing within the landscape itself.

Layered decomposed plants constitute the boglands, soakage retaining memories of childhood, people working to bring home the turf for fuel, of generations, of Meitheal (an Irish term for working together in a community), integral to a sense of place, culture, and



heritage. From a metaphoric subconsciousness, the terrain of the bog soggy, seepage, soakage, spongy, acts 'almost like a metaphor for the unconscious,' (Gladwin 2011, p.387).

Over one sixth of Ireland is covered in bog (Potts 2018), sedimentary compressed layers of lived experiences, material culture and bodies. Bogs comprise a landscape in which things can be unearthed, revealed, and taken out of, such as the ritualistic prehistoric sacrifices in the bog bodies of Clonycavan and Old Croghan Man in Ireland (Kelly 2013); and in Denmark, Huldremose woman and Haraldskjaer woman (Frei et al., 2015). This repository is an archive of narrative, a temporal time capsule containing many secrets, as it has perfectly preserved what has been laid down or hidden within; and for the bog bodies which were sacrificed, or intentionally placed there or in some cases, who accidentally fell in (Glob, 1969).

Explicitly, one is aware that the bog is a natural geological feature of the contemporary Irish landscape. Implicitly the bog, possessing porous, spongey, and conservational, akin to tanning traits, occupies a space in the nation's collective consciousness. This is not only as an archaeological archive capable of encasing and revealing past information and secrets beneath our feet, a 'unique repositories of information about the past' (Hitchcock, 2019, p. 21) but also as Ireland's millennium store bank layered with generational histories, cultures, artefacts, knowledge, memory, psyche, emotions. In this way the bog is a living temporal past, present and future emporium of human life and lived experiences, and acts implicitly as a metaphorical, gendered feminine earth bank, a site of resistance, and a place of refuge for those who have been banished or othered.

The trope of the gendered feminine earth is instinctual in the paganism of Celtic mythology known as 'Celtmythpaganary.' In 'Bogspeak: Biosemiotics and Bogland' Potts (2018) alludes to the conceptualisation in Irish mythology of the land as a Goddess, to whom the King married at the occasion of his inauguration, spiritual semiotics of the appropriated symbiotic relationship between leader of the country and the Goddess of the land. Potts (2018) proposed that the recovered bog bodies from the Stone Age to the Iron Age:

[...] Stoneyisland man in County Galway; Croghan Man in County Offaly; Clonycavan man, in County Meath; and Cashel Man, in County Laois, could have been victims of sacrifice, serving either as offerings to the goddess of

the land, to whom the King was wed in his inauguration ceremony (2018, p.69).

However, the feminine tenderisation of the bog also played a significant role in a 'specifically gendered version of Irishness' where the 'hypermasculinity of Irish national identity in the twentieth century, at least in part a reaction to centuries of feminisation and bestialisation of the Irish under British rule, is well documented,' (O'Connor and Geary, 2021, p.4). Metaphorical connections to the feminine, the Goddess of the land and celebratory Goddess rituals, a metaphorical connection to Irish political martyrdom also exists, with the 'suffering land' sometimes represented as feminine, 'Mother Ireland,' the figure known as Cathleen ni Houlihan (the poor old woman) (Everett and Geary, 2019, 13-14).

Potts (2018) situates the 'bog as a site of resistance in Ireland's colonial history' asserting that when the Norman arrived and for centuries after, the land of the bog itself was resistance to colonisation, 'Bogland [...] was often considered metonymic for Irish character, as the Irish, too, resisted colonialization and were thus defined as outlaws in their own country' (p.69). Analogies between the bog as a place in the landscape where people who are othered, who are on the margins of society, 'from fertile land onto bogland,' (Potts, 2018, p. 69), are confined to, or seek refuge there. The bog, the word being derived from the Gaelic word bogach, meaning soft ground (McClellan, 2008), remains a site of resistance in postcolonial studies, 'a trope for colonial disparagement of the indigenous population ('bogtrotters'),' (Everett and Geary, 2019, p.12) where unresolved legacies from the most successful Ulster plantations still exist in Ireland.

According to Ferris-Taylor et al. (2019, p.70) age is 'more than a set of chronological markers from birth to death; age is a repository to think with and with which to read texts. Waterlogged, spongy, marshy, and porous, in precolonial times acting as a repository for bodies, the bog has also acted as a site of resistance and interrogation in postmodern feminist discourse. Synonymous in Irish literature, poetry and plays, the bog can be interpreted as a gendered liminal feminine place, a repository of secrets, a dwelling place for the shame of society and those who have been othered.

Analogies to the female body as a container of secrets can be drawn with Shildrick's work (1997) on leaky bodies and boundaries; feminism, postmodernism, and bioethics. Looking at the way women's bodies have been historicised and valued by the dominant patriarchal society; Marshall's (1998) review of Shildrick's book *Leaky Bodies*, argues that while:

Women experience the unremitting and impossible struggle to realize the perfection demanded by an inaccessible body ideal [...] leakiness also refers to the leaks and flows across bodies of knowledge and bodies of matter, which emerge once the boundaries between categories are deconstructed (p. 492).

While many studies have been conducted regarding ageing in place (Shank and Cutchin, 2010; Ewen et al., 2017; Rich, Wright, and Loxton, 2018; Quinlan et al., 2020); the dichotomy of women experiencing ageing in the context of this topographical 'leaky' bog wetland landscape, living while simultaneously ageing, has yet to be explored.

With regards to the relationship between body and earth, Oliver (2011) draws:

[...] parallels between archaeology and anatomy, not just in the processes of revealing what lies under the surface, but also in the visceral materiality of the earth itself [...] like the 'strange worlds' that lie beneath our skin, the earth contains layers and walls, interspersed with cavities, canals and tendons that when exposed, like a wound, might discolour and dry out, or darken as they fill with water (p.39).

Hitchcock (2019) notes that peat bogs are the most evocative of this bodily metaphor, their chemical processes and effects often being understood in anthropomorphic terms. In historical, cultural, and socioeconomic terms, bogs and the sphere of bog spaces have been occupied as a patriarchal place/terrain. Traditionally, it was the men who worked the bog. This was particularly evident in the midlands, where, because of major socio-economic progress occurrences throughout Ireland in the 1960s; 5000 men were employed at Bord na Mona PowerStation, in Shannonbridge, Co. Offaly, in the business of providing turf as a substitute to coal (Mullooly, 2020). Over thousands of years, the bog has been continuously plundered, depleted, raped of its natural resources, and stunted in its natural growth. As Balter (2013) identifies:

The impact of men on the environment is of such magnitude that some scientists have even argued that our civilization has moved to a new stadium — the 'Anthropocene'— characterized by extreme depletion of

the natural environment, due to the negative human impact on the environment (cited in Moyano-Díaz et al., 2017, p. 76).

For the raised bogs of the midlands, the Anthropocene has been a time of change. For the first time in history, this landscape that we, as older women, are ageing in and feel connected to, is reclaiming its natural evolutionary growth, the terrain transforming beneath our feet, species of flora and fauna flourishing, and its bank of cultural heritage intact. The importance of the conservation of the peatlands in Ireland, and Europe, has been legislatively recognised: 'Between 2003 and 2005, 75 raised bogs located mainly in the midlands were designated as NHAs,' (National Areas of Heritage) and are now protected as nature reserves, (Clara Bog Nature Reserve, 2022). Semiotically, the concept of the bog reclaiming its identity currently in history, lends itself metaphorically to the analogy of our journey as older women through the landscape in search of reclaiming our identity.

The bog as an occupied site of resistance has been widely evidenced in postcolonial and feminist literature, poetry, and plays. In her review of Gladwin's book, D'Arcy (2011) acknowledges that 'The bog is perhaps one of the most familiar and recognisable aspects of the Irish landscape, and yet it remains enigmatic and can at times act as a site of opposition,' (p. 425). Exploring Gladwin's postcolonial approach to the central questions in the book; D'Arcy sums up how geography and ecology influence Irish culture and society?; Why are 'bogs in Ireland often linked to Gothic themes and the politics of colonisation?; 'And can bogs in Ireland 'be viewed through the lens of Yi-Fu Tuan's (1979) theory of 'landscapes of fear', specifically with regard to their association with the legacy of colonialism?' (p. 425).

The bog landscape acts as a liminal performative theatre arena for many authors, poets, and playwrights. For playwright Carr, as noted above, bogs have eternally existed on the margins of Irish society and have been home to many dispossessed peoples, discourses, spirits, and histories (2011, p.388). It is within this context that Carr consistently engages with representations of Irish women and the expression of female subjectivity (Hill, 2013, p. 174).

In Carr's Midlands Trilogy (*The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *By the Bog of Cats*...) we see her creation of new mythopoeias and 'other possible worlds,' which converge on the landscape as a space of female expression... The bog accommodates shifting identities, the supernatural and the mythic realm...In all three of the Midlands plays, the central character has a private mythology which connects the landscape with the lost other (Hill, 2019, p.19).

Carr's play *By the Bog of Cats* situated in the midlands bog, is loosely based on the story of Greek myth Medea. Margins of dispossession are married in the local and landscape identity in the female traveller character of Hester Swaine, representative of the 'isolated, rural, Pagan [...] in defiance to the community,' (Carr, 2011, p. 387). 'Hester, like her mother and the mythic Catwoman, freely roams the bog and this juxtaposed with Hester's sense of never having 'felt at home' in her house' (Hill, 2019, p.19) Hester's resistance to 'how she should behave in the realms of family, religion, and land ownership separates her as the community itself struggles to remove her and, in doing so, tries to align itself with conventional modernity,' (Carr, 2011, p. 387). Farley (2019) states that 'Hester's connection to the Pagan spiritual world is also a real one,' (p. 181).

Themes of abandonment, ethnic prejudice, motherhood, land ownership, displacement and being othered, feature throughout this play. Ghosts, witchcraft, and mythical figures occupy this mythical liminal landscape. Metaphorically, the colonised bog landscape of place-based violence becomes embodied by its female characters intertwined in their sense of self. Gladwin (2011) argues that in *The Bog of Cats*, Carr 'examines the psychological, cultural, and environmental importance of bogs to Irish collective consciousness. Hester – daughter of the great mother Ireland – mirrors the bog as an abandoned landscape that has been marginalised and traumatised for centuries,' (2011, p. 387). Farley defines that it is Hester's connection to the landscape of *The Bog of Cats* that:

defines her sense of self [...] Her struggle to maintain her familial, spiritual, and landscape-based identity connects her deeply to the Bog of Cats and precludes her ability to leave. Therefore, her refusal to go into exile, as the community wishes, is both an act of self-definition and an attempt to maintain an already strongly defined identity (Farley, 2019, p. 168.).

Bog gothic, Derridean hauntology/spectrality and disrupted temporality feature throughout Carr's work. Like Derrida, Carr's work is 'inextricably linked with a politics of memory that uses the figure of the ghost as its primary conduit between spectrality and the physical world,' (Price, p. 36). In defining a sense of self as an ageing woman through the embodiment of landscape; one must consider Carr's illumination of the bog as a liminal landscape inhabited by spectres; a landscape which disrupts temporality. McGuinness (2003) acknowledging the 'connection between memory and spectres' in Carr's work, notes that 'Carr is a writer haunted by memories she could not possibly possess, but they seem determined to possess her,' (p.87). In the (1996) play *Portia Coughlan*; Price (2022) identifies Carr's utilisation of the figure of the spectre, as deconstructing the 'stable conceptions of temporality and futurity,' (p. 35).

In envisioning a different future for women, theatrical performance offers a way of interpreting, renegotiating, and rejecting the past. The watery landscapes in Carr's plays evoke freedom from culturally constructed roles and offer a place of possibility for the central women' (Hill, 2013, p. 183). Watery landscapes, such as the bog in *The Bog of Cats* and the Belmont River in *Portia Coughlan*, offer a space for women within which things could happen, outside of the restricted confines of the domestic home. In exploring the cultural memory of Irish women's experiences, their engagement with and rejection of that cultural memory and 'the repression of female subjectivity by restrictive models of domesticated femininity,' (Hill, 2013, p.176); Hill argues that 'ghostly performances stage the unsettling effects of the past as it resurfaces in the present; of both individual memory and the cultural memory of female experience' and that 'Portia's haunted body embodies and resists inherited myths of an idealized and domesticated passive Irish femininity,' (p.173). In all of Carr's three Midland plays the women 'use the poetics of mythmaking and storytelling to create a space through which to forge new models of female subjectivity' (Hill, 2019, p.19).

Writer Enda O'Brien specifically wrote about Irish women and their search for identity within a systemic patriarchal regime. Whilst many authors have commented upon O'Brien's 'career-long analysis of the destructive effects of Ireland's patriarchal culture, the imperatives of normative heterosexuality embedded in traditional tropes of authentic

national identity [...] few have noted the significance of peatlands in the fiction,' (O'Connor and Geary, 2021, p.1).

Gilmartin, McGing and Brown (2019) highlight the feminist approach to place and landscape in Ireland as playing a significant role. The spatial turn in the humanities provided an opportunity to see, think and write differently about landscape and place. Taking a feminist approach to place and landscape provides a more balanced approach 'argues for a progressive understanding of space and place' (Reid, 2008).

A juxtaposition occurs in the 'contested landscapes' of the bogland (O'Connor and Geary, 2021, p.2); the acknowledgement of the bog space as a historical patriarchal terrain; and the bog itself as a living entity which is conceptualised and represented as a liminal feminine place through the arts. In this Anthropocene epoch, whilst the bog is acknowledged as one of the most important ecosystems in the world for biodiversity and carbon sequestration, 'ensuring regulation of our climate, water filtration and supply, and important support for human welfare;' in contemporary Ireland the bog remains a contested space. Bogs are often conceptualised as liminal spaces and places, beyond the edges of the known inhabited landscape. It is within this midland landscape that we journey through a liminal place of landscape mythology to enter a space in which we will have a voice.

#### 4.5 Literature Review Conclusion: A new way of representing older women's narratives

In recent times, women's life writing has begun to flourish in Ireland. In the context of life writing about ageing, older women's lived experiences and narratives hold the key to understanding their perspectives.

O'Neill and Schrage-Früh (2019) philosophies that:

[...] life writing by and about older women often necessitates opening out literary forms and modes of critique, searching for narrative and performative strategies, and creating spaces in which to inscribe subjective experiences. [...] Relationships, intergenerational connections, and visual and material cues are often integral to these analyses (p.6).

Manning (2004, 2010) offered her participants an opportunity to tell their stories in the hope of giving them a voice that can be heard not just at the margins, but within all of society. Significant to my study, as noted above, Manning's study provides a stepping stone to emulate the provision of dedicated time and space within a physical and liminal context to explore questions of ageing. In my study, I extend this dedicated time and space to a yearlong participative journey through the Celtic Festivals of the Seasons.

Underpinned by an intersectional third-wave critical feminist approach and combining the theoretical fields of gerontology and sociology, my study examines the concepts of 'performing ageing' from twenty-one women participants (including myself) own lived experience of being an older woman in Ireland. A space was offered to reflect on our feelings and experiences of identity and ageing, and to journal these feelings and experiences through poetry. Our lifecourse narratives are central to this study, providing the lens through which we, as older women, make sense of our world.

While Edstrom's study (2018) highlighted a double-edged sword analogy as to how cultural ideas of gender and age 'can contribute to stereotyping and discrimination as well as challenge dominant power structures within society,' (p.78); this study aims to challenge the dominant sociocultural narratives in mediated culture by providing a space where older women can negotiate, become cognisant and internalise their identity through their poetic narratives of their lived experiences.



As outlined above, the aim of this study is to challenge the dominant hegemonic narrative of what it means to be an older woman; to negotiate strategies, power relations, and agency in exploring identity; and in doing so, create a new cultural narrative of what it means to be an older woman in contemporary Irish society.

In the next chapter, the methodology I adopted for this study is explored in depth. It sets out my choice of methods, the rationale for these methods, ethical considerations, the construction of the heptagonal methodological model, and the data analysis techniques used.

## 5. Research Methods

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the multi-method qualitative approach used in this research to obtain and later analyse the research findings. This research set out to:

1. Explore older women's lived experiences of ageing in contemporary Ireland
2. Examine how they felt about their identity as older women
3. Investigate older women's experiences of participating in the yearlong rituals of the Celtic Festivals of the Seasons.

Framed in an intersectional third wave feminist approach (Crenshaw, 1989, 2005; Etorre, 2017); underpinned by autoethnography; and utilising poetic inquiry as a conduit to the unconscious; the trajectory to the design of this research was conceptualised over the course of several years through the process, product, and legacies of poetry workshops which I had facilitated in the community with older women.

Poetic inquiry is a form of qualitative research using poetry as a tool of inquiry (Prendergast, 2009), which can be used in a variety of research approaches including in ethnographic, autoethnographic and narrative studies (McCullis, 2013). The potential transformative use of poetry as an arts informed methodology in research and education is explored by Thomas et al., (2012) who identifies 'poetry as a mode of being, knowing and telling; ways of using poetry in research; and examples of how poetry and poetic inquiry combine for personal and social transformation,' (p. xii).

For many years, I had been utilising poetry as a medium to engage the community and understood the transformative power of poetry. As a performance artist, poet, social care practitioner, lecturer, and researcher, I believe that:

Poetry has the power to bring together and unite so many different people in our community that otherwise may not have met. Poetry as a medium for community engagement has the capacity to change people's lives, and as an art form is vital to developing social capital for the community across all ages, races, and abilities (Coyle, 2014, online).

In formulating the methodological approach to examine how older women feel about their identity in Ireland; I brought together my interests in the creative qualitative

methodologies in social care, social justice, community engagement and social gerontology; utilising the arts-based collaborative, participative medium of poetry as an expressive tool of discovery and inquiry.

In praxis, I have been using poetry to explore identity. My poetry provides an avenue for the voicing and expression of identities in various spaces; such as young people in residential care; isolated or marginalised groups in society; people with intellectual disabilities; and older women in Irish society (Coyle, 2014, 2015, 2017; Coyle and McKenna, 2017).

I was drawn to voicing the lived experiences of the older women I met. And around this time in 2014, I started researching, writing about, and presenting older women's stories of their identity. Consequently, my reflexivity as an artist/poet/pracademic/researcher and older woman converged at a eureka crossroads to consolidate the framework of my research questions. I wanted to explore older women's sense of identity, including myself, through poetic inquiry.

I wanted to design a research methods framework which would incorporate multiple opportunities to gather data in relation to older Irish women's lived experiences of ageing and the exploration of their identity as older women in Irish society. I also wanted to embed my personal research philosophy of collaborative methods of co-production; co-construction; co-design; and co-creation; into the research framework.

Methodologically, I was drawn to autoethnography as a conceptual lens. Interpreting my personal experience of ageing would lead to an understanding of the cultural experiences of older women in Ireland (Ellis et al., 2011). Grist (2013, p.4.) notes that 'When autoethnography is adopted, it is often mutated or adapted to best suit varied research purposes.' The multiple methods of this research design provided a robust framework for collecting and analysing the data collected. Multiple methods yielded multiple qualitative data; from an autoethnographic perspective, in poetic form and from interview data, participant observations and field notes, which were then thematically analysed (Bryman, 2012).

Reviewing alternative methods in research to enable women to articulate their experiences of ageing led me to Hogan and Warren's (2012) research which utilised several complex

visual research methods and participatory approaches to create alternative images of ageing; including art elicitation, photo diaries, film booths, and phototherapy. Their use of multiple qualitative methods thus set a precedent for the methodological approach taken in my study.

The participation of the women in the rituals of the Celtic Festivals of the Seasons set the geoliminal context for my study. The initial research design was constructed using qualitative methods of autoethnography (how I related my lived experience of ageing to the cultural context of women ageing in Ireland in that snapshot of time); poetic inquiry (including my poems and poetry journal, the participant's poems, and poetry journals); semi structured interviews; and my reflective journal, participant observations and field notes. As a result of the organic production of artefacts by the participants on the journey, a further art-based inquiry research method was added to the final methodology.

My role as co-participant in the festivals; and co-creator of poetry which explore understandings and expressions of Irish identity; meets Anderson's (2006, p.378) prerequisites of autoethnography as facilitator; co-creator; and creator of the finished text.

In this study I was:

- a) A full member in the research group
- b) Visible as a member in researcher's published text
- c) Committed to an analytic research agenda focusing on improving theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena

Anderson promotes a version of the method in which the following five conditions should be met: '(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis,' (Anderson 2006, p.378).

Utilising autoethnography as a research method enabled my lived experience as an older woman in Ireland to become the template for understanding older women's perspectives of their ageing and identity in the same sociocultural contemporary Irish context.

Ellis, Adams, and Boucher describe using autoethnography as a research method as a 'political, socially-just and socially conscious act' (2011, p.273). As an autoethnographic

researcher, I understood that I was part of my research data and felt 'obliged to acknowledge the self-interests, values, political ideals, and emotions that'...I brought... 'to the research project' (Boucher and Ellis 2016, p.57). Exploring evocative autoethnography as the telling, writing, interpreting, and reflecting on, my story of self as an older woman; my ageing; and my identity; what I had observed, and what I had experienced; positioned the analysis of my personal insight as the benchmark to understanding the cultural experiences of older women in Irish society.

Whilst the research method of poetic inquiry acted as another medium of discovery in my study, it was the use of my autoethnographic lens which brought the research together. My autoethnographic lens consisted of; my values as a feminist researcher; my subjectivities and insider knowledge as participant, facilitator and researcher; the valuing of my relationship with the other women; my ethical obligation to ensuring that their lived experienced stories of ageing and identity were not only heard, but were part of envisioning what could be; the nature of my reflexivity in interrogating intersections of our stories against the sociocultural Irish backdrop; my writing throughout the process striving to make meaning of our identities as older women; and my quest to disrupt the dominant narrative of how older women are understood in contemporary Irish society, in order to (re)claim our new socially just story.

Many have reflected on the use of poetry in critical qualitative research (Sameshina et al., 2017). Faulkner and Cloud (2020) ask the question 'What spaces can poetry create for dialogue about critical awareness, social justice, and revisioning of social, cultural, and political work?' In this research, poetic inquiry through my poems and poetry diary; the participant's poems, and their poetry diaries; and through the co-constructed communal poem; created a space where discourses of women's lived experiences of ageing could be voiced.

The one question of 'how do you feel about being an older woman in Irish society?' set the overarching theme of my study. The initial interview with that one question provided the step off into reflective thought about ageing. Interviews conducted after the yearlong journey offered an opportunity for the participants to summarise their feelings around ageing and their identity.

Throughout the journey, I gathered data from field notes onsite at the festivals - data was obtained by reflecting on what exactly was happening in my reflective journal; I, as a participant on the journey, having 'insider' access, observed the participants and chose to concentrate on one specific participant at each festival. Data was gathered from the unplanned research method of artefact production from the various artefacts produced on the journey – such as art, jewellery, stone art, music, plants, dance, rituals, and craft making.

## 5.2 Participants, Ethics, and the Festivals

As referred to, I have been using poetry inquiry as a means of engaging the community for many years. As facilitator of Poetry in the Park (ChangeX, 2020), I established outreach poetry workshops with older women in the community. These included the Widows Association (National Association of Widows in Ireland, 2018); Active retirement groups (St Marys Active Retirement Athlone, 2020); various nursing homes and the Irish Wheelchair Association Athlone (2020); where I found that reading, writing, or discussing poetry provided an opportunity for discourse about how these older women experienced their ageing in Ireland.

Through my work *Phenomenal Women* (2015) 'an avenue for narrative was unveiled, allowing older women to vocalise their feelings 'of being invisible in society,' (Coyle, 2015, p.2). Thus, as a poet and performance artist, I have utilised my poetry to provide an avenue for the voicing and expression of identities in various spaces (Coyle, 2014, 2015, 2017; Coyle and McKenna, 2017) and am equipped not only with a co-constructive poetic inquiry toolkit to interact sensitively with the participants, but also with the competencies from a background in social care work.

In terms of the ethical considerations, all the women participants involved in the study volunteered with written informed consent (see Appendix 3, pp. 321-324). The question was asked if any of the participants wanted to be anonymous by another name? All the women asked to be acknowledged under their own name. The consensus seemed to be that this study was about identity, and we wanted to be identifiable. None of the participants would be considered vulnerable under the University of Gloucestershire Research Ethics Guidelines, under the guidance of which I conducted this study.

I have developed a good relationship with these women over many years and share important levels of trust with them. They were recruited through my connections to poets, writers, and artists in the community and in Athlone Community Radio (n.d.) where I am active. The trusting relationship between the researcher and the participant/s has been recognised as a key conduit in poetic inquiry studies (Cole and Knowles, 2010; Finley, 2003).

Being cognisant of the power of poetry as a medium to initiate discussion; and using poetry as a painter would use their paintbrush as a tool of discovery with various groups across the life course; reading poems aloud, listening to poetry being read, discussing poems, and relating poetry to one 's lived experiences; it became more explicit to me how powerful the medium of poetry as conduit for research. Subsequently, I began to think and weave the idea of how individual, participative, and collaborative poetry could be employed as a method of research to open a tightly locked door about women ageing in Ireland; to discover what older women's lived experiences of ageing were; and explore if and how they constructed their identity as older women in juxtaposition to the social construction of older women in contemporary Ireland.

Several factors influenced the methodological approach of using autoethnography and poetic inquiry. Factors included the desire as a researcher to elicit genuine data from older women in Irish society; the concept of exploring ageing and identity with the participants, and as a participant; and having a personal understanding of the interpretive nature and flow of poetic inquiry as a creative methodological tool. Relationships of trust had already been established with the women through our previous participation in art and poetry projects. This legacy of relational trust proved advantageous as we stepped off the edge into unknown territories of geographical, metaphorical, and mythological spaces on our individual and collective journeys.

O'Neill and Schrage-Früh's (2019) work provided an opportunity for older women's narratives to be explored through 'diverse forms of life writing including memoirs and (auto)biography, digital and visual forms of life narrative as well as autoethnographic accounts' (p.2). Acknowledging, exploring, and contextualising older women's personal narratives through life writing has the potential to subsume older women's lived experiences into the wider societal and cultural arena.

However, a lacuna exists in research with older women in Ireland with regards to how they feel about their lived experiences of ageing; how they feel about their identity; and how they negotiate and navigate their ageing identity in Ireland. This study aimed to counteract that lacuna by methodologising participatory 'narrative and performative strategies' (O'Neill and Schrage-Früh, 2019.p.6) to create a space 'in which to inscribe subjective experiences,' (p.6).

Older women's experiences of identity were explored through their poetry; the co-construction of communal poetry; and their participation in the rituals of the Celtic Festivals of the Seasons. The energy and power of the mythological Goddess Ériu, the sovereign Goddess of Ireland; was used as a metaphorical beacon of transformative light in which the women could access and 'tap into' along their journey. It was through this interpretive lens of flow that the women's poems were recited, co constructed, and through the facilitation of a workshop at each event, collaboratively morphed into a communal poem which was then performed collectively.

My reflective diary, participant observation and field notes were used to gather data from each event and between events. Narrative inquiry interviews (Grix, 2010; Rubin and Rubin, 2005) also took place after the last event. The events were planned to coincide with the dates of the Festival of the Seasons. After each event, I would send an email inviting the women to reflect on their ageing under a theme relevant to the following festival.

A total of thirty women participated over the six events (See Appendix 2: Table 1- List of Participants and Festivals Attended on page 319-320). I choose to concentrate on twenty-one core participants (including myself). The main reason being that of those twenty-one participants, there was a high turnout and commitment.

Of the twenty-one core participants, six had participated in all six Festivals (Erica, Ruth, Aine, Sadhbh, Nicole and I); four participated in five Festivals (Maria, Rosemarie, Patsy, Paula); four participated in four Festivals (Bridie, Tina, Ursula, Dee); one participated in three Festivals (MaryL); three participated in two Festivals (Sharon, Janice, Amy); and three participated in one Festival (Chris, Anne, Patricia). I included these last three participants who attended one Festival in the core group; as they created and read their own poems at that festival and contributed to the collaborative communal poem on the day.



The reasons for including some of the participants who had not participated in all the Festivals; into the core group were various. Three of the women (Bridie (4), Sharon (2), and Janice (2)) are representative of the diaspora of women in their third age who are living abroad in the UK. While they could not be physically present at all the festivals, they wanted to be part of the journey and sent poetry by email to be read on their behalf.

Anne, who was there at the first Bealtaine Festival in 2017, could not be physically present for the remainder of the journey (she was moving to another part of Ireland); however, similar to the women living abroad, she very much wanted to be part of the journey, and, she and they, remained part of the group and journey through their poetry; which I and the other women would read out at the festivals on their behalf.

The remaining nine participants (Margaret, Roisin, Doreen, Brygida, Collette, Catherine, Mary, and Teresa) were not chosen to be part of the core group and not included in this research study. Two of the women; Margaret and Roisin, friends of Patsy; whom we met unplanned at the Winter Solstice Festival were, what I call accidental participants who joined us in the flow of the journey. Having spent the night before the Winter Solstice on the Hill, they ended up joining us in music and poetry the next day. While they were very much aware of our journey, I did not include them as participants in the study as they had not originally signed the consent form (see Appendix 1, page 318). Three of the other participants, Teresa, Collette, and Barbara who were also not chosen, had joined later in the journey, could only attend one Festival, and had not signed the consent form (see Appendix 1, page 318).

The remaining three participants were friends who joined us for the final Bealtaine Festival in 2018; Catherine and Doreen, Erica's mother, who joined us from the UK; and Brygida, who travelled from Poland to join us.

While not explicitly asked as a question, I was aware that the majority of the twenty-one women (including myself) were born into and had grown up in a Catholic religion background. Four of the women identified as Catholic; one woman as belonging to the Church of Ireland; one as Muslim; one as a Druid; one as agnostic; one as Buddhist; and

two as Pagans. Most of the women would identify as non-practising or lapsed Catholics. I identified as a Catholic born woman interested in Nature or Celtic spirituality.

### 5.3 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is an autobiographical style of writing and research that connects personal and cultural experiences. Autoethnographers not only observe the world around them, but also examine their internal perceptions and feelings about their place in that world. Usually written in the first-person voice, 'autoethnographic works can take various forms: poetry, short stories, fiction, novels, photographic essays, and social-science prose. These accounts include characters, action, dialogue, and emotional response,' (Angrosini, 2006, p. 166).

While I was drawn to autoethnography as a way of being in the world, I was also aware that there is a vulnerability in revealing how one lives their life. Being reflective and reflexive is part of my social care practice and my personal way of life; and I was aware of how the power structures of the Catholic Church and the state had formed the sociocultural context that I grew up in. However, prior to beginning this study, while I may have reflected on sociocultural context for women in Ireland; I never reflect deeply on my own lived experience as a woman, now an older woman in contemporary Ireland, and what impact Irish patriarchal power structures had in shaping my identity.

To me, autoethnography is like entering a huge, cavernous cave with magnificent stalagmite and stalactites and you are just wondering, in awe of this state, this flow of how to be, act and think, now you're consciously reflecting when you look at the world, that the taking in of what you see, feel, and experience, acts as a personal prism to analyse and reflect as a template of understanding across the spectrum of society.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, p1) define autoethnography as 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience'. In concurrence with Boyle and Parry (2007, p.3) who note that autoethnography moves from a 'broad lens focus on individual situatedness within the cultural and social context, to a focus on the inner, vulnerable and often resistant

self.' In my study, my internal frame of reference as an older woman in Irish society is applied to explore how older women see their identity in contemporary Ireland.

Participating in the rituals also offered an opportunity for co-creation and relationality to emerge. As Reynolds and Erikson (2017) suggest, 'Anthropological research on liminality highlights how ritual activity produces a space that serves as a threshold between states, allowing for meaningful social transformations (van Gennep [1909] 1960; Turner 1969, 1974),' (p.2-3).

Participating in rituals leads to individual and collective experiences. From a sociological and anthropological disciplinary perspective, rituals are defined as collective activities with meaningful experiences arising from the group aspect. In contrast, psychological research maintains that rituals can be undertaken as solitary or group performances (Reynolds and Erikson, 2017). Participation in rituals of the festivals, particularly the immersion at Lough Lugh, could only, I believe, have taken place within a trusting, supporting, empathising, non-judgmental relationship. As an 'insider participant' sharing an important level of trust with the other women, I began to analyse my experiences to understand the cultural experience (Reed-Danahay 1997, 2009).

Autoethnographers ideally utilise all their senses, their bodies, movement, feeling, and their whole being to learn about others (Angrosini, 2007, p.166). As a research medium, autoethnography is based upon the principles of participation, collaboration, and engagement aligning with my personal philosophy of work as an artist/poet. I reflected on how I had come to the realisation that my lived experience as an ageing woman could connect to what was happening culturally for older women in Ireland? And how did I intuitively know that autoethnography was the research method that I would use? Over time spent in the forest of deep thinking, I understood that I was the living embodiment of the research, it was imperative that I too would be included in the research.

Previously I been working through different research methodologies (mostly art based) until I eventually discovered autoethnography as a way of researching included my personal lived experiences. My approach is influenced by, among others, Ellis (2004; 2018), Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2016), Bochner and Ellis (2016), Chang (2008), Denzin (2007, 2008, 2010, 2014, 2018), Grist and Jennings (2020), and Etorre (2017).

I was no longer on the outside looking in; I was embedded in the research landscape; my lived experience and reflection on the experience of the research journey would also form part of the data; I too was included. Reflecting on the process that led me to autoethnography, I visualise it as hammering at the same stone, carving with different tools, until I finally had the correct implement to elicit meaning. Writing autoethnographically was a transformative experience, one which there is no going back from.

After many years living in the UK, in 2000 I returned to my hometown of Athlone in the midlands, Co Westmeath. Athlone is geographically close to Uisneach, the sacred and mythological centre of Ireland, and I was aware of the archaeological, historical, and mythological significance of this landscape as a process of heritage. In Uisneach, beneath Ail na Mireann, where Ériu the sovereign Goddess of Ireland is laid to rest, the mythological reference to transformation is contextualised as a site-specific access to the Otherworld.

I have always felt a connection to the landscape of the midlands, where mythological figures, secrets, mystics, and ghosts are embedded in the seeping bog repositories of cultural memory, and this connection is evidenced in my poetry such as *The Bog Queen*. Around 2015, I began to think about performing a site-specific bog immersion with the concept of stripping away the social construction of ageing in Irish society. In the same year I presented, along with my colleague Nicole McKenna, *Phenomenal Woman: A Poetic View of the Social Construction of Widows in Society* (Coyle and McKenna, 2015) at the *Women and Ageing: New Cultural and Critical Perspectives* conference in Limerick. During discussions with fellow women artists, Nicole and I raised the idea of inviting older women to immerse in the bog together. My immersion through performance art and poetry in *The Bog Queen* installation arose out of reflecting on, being in, and being of, the landscape as an older woman. Poetry acted as the red thread running through, connecting the concepts.

Reflecting on my embarkation on this research journey; I now realise that my previous poetry, art performances, and film installations have been instrumental as a conceptual prelude lens to reveal (to myself and the audience) the 'multiple layers of consciousness,' (Austin, 2010, Ellis, 2007, Reed Danahay, 1997, 2001, 2017) which connected my personal to the cultural. I, as an older woman in Ireland had begun to explore my experience of identity, and how I felt about the experience through various art-based mediums.

In concurrence with Denzin (2014), my study uses interpretive autoethnography, in that it presents the work, the unique experiences, the writing through poetry, visuals, the overflows from art with the aim of giving voice to the marginalised. Jones (2013, p.78) notes that performance is a means and mechanism for embodying our individual responsibilities to community and an ethics of participation, while Adams and Jones (2008) see it as a socially just and socially conscious act.

Autoethnographic data is not strictly rigid, it is messy data. However, Grist (2013.p.3) highlights 'that autoethnography can be both a valued qualitative methodological tool and a legitimate and defensible mode of writing research.' Sandelowskis (2011) suggests that using a range of data collection methods, as my study employed, can substantiate the authenticity within data sets, and methodologies do not have inherently rigid boundaries.

According to Chang (2008, p.2) 'autoethnography is ethnographical and autobiographical at the same time'. As Adams, Bochner and Ellis hold, 'Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno),' (2011, p.273). As a result, Ellis and Bochner (2000, p.739) explain that 'multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural' emerge. By adopting an evocative autoethnographic approach, critical analysis and discussion can provide an understanding of how older women experience their identity in Irish society and strategies for promoting agency put in place.

Muncey (2010) espouses that autoethnography is aligned to the epistemological praxis of social constructivism, given that the experience of understanding the world is constructed through your own lived experience and understanding. Ellis (2016, p.10) notes that autoethnography is the 'opening to honest and deep reflection about ourselves, our relationship with others, and how we want to live'. Coming from a background in social care, I am also interested in the political component of activism in the face of social injustice, inequality, and injustice; using a feminist intersectional perspective in seeking to give those a voice that otherwise may not be heard.

Bochner and Ellis (2001), originators of evocative autoethnography, emphasise how this approach connects intellectually and emotionally to the lives of readers through the

representation of challenging lived experiences. Tough questions were told through 'artful and evocative forms of expression-short stories, poetry, performance, music and art,' (2001, p.10). Their methodology is important to my study, as I too used a complex methodological approach of autoethnography and poetic inquiry with storytelling at its core.

My approach sought to evoke 'forms of expression' through 'personal experiences, emotions and interactions with others,' (Ellis and Bochner, 2015). I was drawn to what Ellis stated, that she 'want[s] autoethnography to stay unruly, dangerous, passionate, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative – in motion, showing struggle, passion, embodied life, and collaborative creation of sense-making,' (Gulamhusein, 2018, p.p.53-54).

Holman Jones et al. (2014) identified four characteristics of autoethnography

1. Purposely commenting on critiquing of culture/cultural practice
2. Making contributions to existing research
3. Embracing vulnerability with purpose
4. Creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences to compel a response

Many different approaches to autoethnography have therefore been documented. All attempt to weave personal narratives of experience with the study of cultural phenomena and existing theory with the aim of producing hard to reach accounts of experience. Various discourses question the validity and rigour of autoethnography as a methodological tool. Chang (2008, p.1) states that, for autoethnographic work to achieve rigor, it must be 'ethnographical in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation.' To achieve this, researchers who engage in autoethnography must learn to concurrently straddle several ontological genres. In concurrence, Le Roux's (2016, p.1) study concluded that the 'academic rigour of autoethnographic studies should be established to enhance its credibility and value and that the criteria used need to be judiciously determined and applied'.

Tensions have also arisen between the views of evocative and analytic autoethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2006) classified these differences in terms of 'evocative' and 'analytical' approaches, where evocative autoethnography foregrounds the writer's personal stories and analytical autoethnography connects to 'some broader set of social phenomena than

those provided by the data themselves,' (Anderson, 2006, p. 387). On the analytic side, Anderson (2006) notes that 'autoethnography loses its sociological promise when it dissolves into self-absorption,' (p.385). Concurring, Atkinson (2007, p.400) states that '...the goals of analysis and theorising are too often lost to sight in contemporary fashions for subjective and evocative ethnographic work.' While Ellis and Bochner (2001, p. 433) state that:

Leon [Anderson] wants to take the autoethnography, which, as a mode of inquiry, was designed to be unruly. Dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative and bring it under the control of reason, logic, and analysis [...] Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodies life and the collective creation of sense making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning.

They conceive analytic autoethnography as more conventional, presenting facts and findings, however, on the other hand, they also argue that '[...] good analysis can be evocative!' (Ellis and Bochner 2006, p.443).

I believe in the academic integrity of autoethnography as a methodology. My approach of evocative autoethnography with an analytical approach is informed by Ellis' (2008) work on ethnography's own internal theoretical framework; with three aspects of method; methodology; and theorising. My research; while personal and emotional; with the connection of my lived experience being evident; has an analytical approach. I want to analyse and discuss the findings and explicitly connect them to theory. Having a reflective diary was important to me, as I tried to make sense of what was happening by writing and reflecting. The data I collected was used to explain my feelings and thoughts about the study, what was happening on the journey, what the participants were discussing; while thinking about the broader social implications. As Baugerud (2017, p.46), claims 'it is possible to do emotionally engaged writing in tandem with a broader cultural and social analysis and interpretation'

#### 5.4 Using Poetic Inquiry as a tool of discovery

Poetic inquiry was used as a methodological tool of discovery through the individual journaling of poems, and the co-constructed poetry on site. As Faulkner (2017) notes, 'poetic inquiry is the use of poetry crafted from research endeavours, either before project

analysis, as a project analysis, and/or poetry that is part of or that constitutes an entire research project,' (p. 210).

Poetic inquiry was used to provide an avenue for the women's narratives of their lived experiences as older women to be told. Celebrating the Celtic Festivals of the Seasons through participative rituals at Uisneach offered a contextual setting; where we, as older women in Irish society, could explore and make meaning of our understanding of our identity and convey the essence of these experiences. The one overarching question was 'How do I feel about my identity as an ageing woman in Irish society?' In response to this question, we created poetry, individual and communal, to communicate our experiences of ageing; drafting our poems in our journals to recite at the festivals.

Poetic language can be found in all cultures around the world and throughout recorded history; with written poetry being the most ancient record of human literature (Zilkowski, 2012). The island of Ireland, being on the edge in geographical terms, as an island on the Atlantic fringe at the edge of Europe; has preserved a rich oral tradition of poetry as narrative, integral to Irish culture. Evidence of poetry written in native Gaelic language exists from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards, representing the most primitive and original vernacular poetry in Europe (Knott, 1934).

While poetic inquiry has become part of a trend in the social sciences that used arts-based mediums (Sjollema et al., 2016, p.1); poetic inquiry methods offer a particularly fruitful lens to understand and examine older women's lived experience of their identity in Irish society. Utilising poetic inquiry as a means of social justice and political response; Faulkner and Cloud (2019) consider 'how poetic inquiry speaks to our local identities and politics and how poetry and poetry inquiry be used as a pedagogical tool to critique inequitable social structures?' Faulkner (2010, p.1) argues for the use of poetic inquiry as a feminist methodology detailing how poetry as research offers 'a means of doing, showing, and teaching embodiment and reflexivity, a way to refuse the mind-body dialectic, a form of feminist ethnography, and a catalyst for social agitation and change,' (2010, p.1).

Concurring, Haldane (2010), a poet and neuroscientist, states that 'poetry has more capacity to change people than psychotherapy,' (online). Brady notes that poetic methods 'call for self-conscious participation.' He uses the analogy of poetry magnifying encounters



with life, as 'lived, up close and personal,' (2009.p. xi). From a shamanic perspective Lee (2004) states that 'Poets like shamans are singers, calling us to hear the hidden meanings wrapped in their songs and images... seeking to make clear primary aesthetic values that imbue life with depth, shadow, and unseen possibilities,' (p. 22).

Little is known about how the brain processes and creates poetic text. Wassiliwizky, Koelsch, Wagner, Jacobsen, and Menninghaus' (2017) study explored how poetry affects the emotions by performing a series of studies in which psychophysiological measures, neuroimaging data and behavioural responses were collected. Findings indicated that 'poetry represents an ancient, cross-cultural, and emotionally powerful variety within the human communicative and expressive repertoire' (p. 1239). In concurrence, Jacob's (2015) notes the suitability of poetry to show how 'our brains construct the world in and around us, unifying thought, language, music, and images with play, pleasure, and emotion' (p.2). Delving into poetry which operates at an emotionally powerful level; I wanted to use poetic inquiry as I am interested in the alchemic ability of poetry to reveal something new to the writer; to provide an opportunity for the person to transcend to another level (another world, Otherworld); or indeed unpeel or reveal another layer (again multiple layers); a place which may be surprising to themselves (the unconscious revealing of self).

According to Prendergast, Leggo and Sameshima (2009) poetic inquiry usually belongs to the following three categories:

1. through the discourse of poems, and by responses written or recorded in response to poems (VOX THEORIA)
2. through researcher voiced poems (VOX AUTOBIOGRAPHICA)
3. through Participant-voiced poems, singular, or multiple voices from the interviews or directly from the participants, co-created with the researcher, written from interview transcripts, or solicited directly from participants, (VOX PARTICIPARE), in which, inquiry poems may blend both the researcher's and the participants' voices (p.11).

Prendergast et al. (2009) note that 'the voices of both the researcher and research participant are pertinent to poetic inquiry studies. The researcher's voice is commonly

heard using autobiographical poems (see Furman, 2004, 2006, 2008) or through reflective poetry written as part of the research process,' (Sjollema and Bilotta 2016, p.19).

According to Watson (2010) older women as a group are often ignored in society. Poetic inquiry as a method lends itself to the voicing of older women's stories. Faulkner et al.'s (2022) study identifies how poetic inquiry in the form of poetry portraiture can be utilised to present older women's stories. Life story interviews were conducted with 18 older women. Poetic portraiture was then utilised as a form of poetic inquiry to give voice to the women's stories. Poetic portraits were then created by Faulkner's students to present the women's stories.

The data for my study was elicited from all three of Prendergast, Leggo and Sameshima's (2009) categories cited above, from responses to poems, from researcher voiced poems, written from field notes, narrative inquiry interviews, autoethnographic writing as the data source and from participant voiced poems; created directly from the participant and co-created with myself as researcher or from both methods. There was also a further category of poetic inquiry; communal poetry, where we as a group made poetry together, where I weaved the individual lines into a communal poem.

## 5.5 Narrative inquiry Interviews

According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006), people shape their lives

'by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story...is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of

thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study' (p. 375).

Narrative inquiry interviews were the most suitable for this research, as narrative inquiry focuses not only on the interviewee's story but also on the sociocultural narratives within which their experience is storied (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). In using narrative inquiry interviews; the participant had the flexibility to frame issues, experiences and events which were personally meaningful and important to them. While the interview question acted as a guide; the question was an open one allowing the participant to 'ramble' or go off on a tangent on certain topics. The strength of the qualitative method lies in the fact of meeting interviewees face to face in the interview situation. Within the interviewing context, opportunities can be accessed to gather more information, ask follow up questions and clarify questions. Rubin and Rubin (2005) describe qualitative interviews as being conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion. The researcher elicits depth and detail about the research topic by following up on answers given by interviewee during the discussion' (p.4).

Riessman (2002, p.34) notes that qualitative data provides 'richness, diversity, accuracy, and contextual depth.' Bryman (2004) concurs, noting that allowing the interviewer to 'see through the other's eyes,' (p.338) qualitative research gives the participants the opportunity to reveal their perceptions and experiences rather than the more controlled and reductive procedures of quantitative methods.

Qualitative methods facilitate a diversity and depth which quantitative methods cannot reach. Holiday (2007, p.6) observes that while quantitative research 'counts occurrence across a large population, 'qualitative research 'looks deep into the quality of social life.'

During the narrative inquiry interviews, I used research procedures and tools such as observing the participant's body language and social cues; listening to the tone of the participant's voice; their linguistics; and their use of phraseology to gain additional information. I monitored the participant's reactions to the questions asked; actively listened; and was attuned and responsive to what the participant was saying. The interviews were conducted in the 'flow' approach; a state of consciousness so focused that

it amounts to absolute absorption in an activity, a complete engagement in the process (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). In asking the question, how do you feel about your identity as an older woman in Ireland? While participants responded there and then to the question, they also had the opportunity to reflect and add to their replies at various times throughout the yearlong journey.

The question itself was embodied through the journey; being lived through; being in the landscape; through the rituals; through the sharing of lived experiences; through the sisterhood; and in the 'flow of the journey through time, space and ritual'. Reflecting in those spaces enabled us to immerse ourselves in 'deep thinking' (Bloom, 1956), which influenced our daily lived experiences in the in-between spaces outside of the journey space.

In my work as a performer, artist, poet, drama lecturer, I instinctively work in the flow, interpreting concepts, actioning, performing, while reflecting in action as I work (Schon and DeSanctis, 1986). Working in the flow is a state which comes naturally to me and I reflected on how this informs my practice, research, and relationality. The flow approach acted as the lubricant in which we could deeply immerse, and happenings could take place. Some of the interviews took place while we were also making art in the creative flow; such as when I was interviewing Tina, while we were both creating acrylic pour paintings, a process I called creative flow inquiry.

In-depth verbal and non-verbal communication skills are crucial to successful qualitative research. Holliday (2007, p.6) highlights the use of devising research procedures to adapt to the situation and the nature of the people in it, as they are revealed. Manning (2010) used utilised semi-structured interviews to explore the meaning of life and ageing for women identifying as Pagan. Findings from Manning's study indicated that 'specific spiritual orientation of select women shapes the social meaning and process of their aging,' (p.1). Including narrative inquiry interviews in my study offered the women another avenue to express their feelings about their identity as older women in Ireland.

One question was asked in the pre-interview: 'How do you feel as an older woman in Irish society?' The final interviews were conducted focusing on what the women were feeling after their journey (about their ageing; identity; participation in the rituals). These

questions were: 'How are you after the journey?' 'How did you feel about participating in the rituals?' (e.g., Immersion in Lough Lugh, Honouring the Ancestors Full Moon ceremony), and 'How did you find working through poetry?'

### 5.6 Participant Observation

According to Spadley (1980) participant observation can be defined as a research method which aims to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a group of individuals (such as a religious, occupational, sub cultural group, or a particular community) and their practices over an extended period, in their own cultural environment. Utilising the participant observation method over time gives an insight into the group's cultural practices.

As the Festivals of the Season's rituals were taking place over a year-long journey; the method of participant observation afforded an intimate lens to understanding the women's lived experiences. With already established close trusting relationships with the women in this study (Kumar, 2014); the women were aware and comfortable that in my role as researcher; I would also be observing and recording during the rituals. As a fellow participant, I also had the opportunity to develop close interactions and observe the women as an 'insider' member of the group.

As my roles included facilitating, performing, and researching at each event; my intention was to focus on a different participant at each of the events. Onsite, I would gauge what I thought had made an impact on a person; or what 'critical happenings' occurred with which participants; and I would then decide to observe that person.

The gender of the group structure also has an impact, as women participating in all-women groups behave differently than women in mixed groups. Carnes and Craig (1998, p.57) suggest 'that all-women groups are a place where feminine values, ways of being, and ways of knowing are embraced'. Reflecting on how the women had bonded, I realised that from the first event where I 'held' the women; in the subsequent events, the group formed naturally and the women instinctively 'held' each other; which in turn enabled the facilitation of free flow meaningful discourse, and the sharing of our lived experiences.

Looking at how non-verbalised emotions can be used in research; Lanas (2011) found that emotionally sensed knowledge 'can be seen as an indispensable part of the research

process, and that researchers' emotions can be indispensable tools for gathering and analysing data using ethnographic methods,' (p.2).

Participant observation enabled me to take a snapshot in time of what I observed the women doing out in the field, and literally in the fields of Uisneach; while all the other empirical methods are limited to reporting what people say about what they do.

While I had specifically selected Sharon as the participant to observe at the first event, at the other events, as written above, I gauged the happenings and what impact it had made on the participants; and then made the decision who to observe. For example, at the first Festival of Bealtaine, I invited the women to read aloud their own poems or reflections; deliberately not assigning a running order; leaving it to flow as naturally as possible.

Those who wished to read aloud could do so, there was no obligation. As a researcher, I was conscious that one of the participants, Sharon; had never read her poetry aloud in front of others and had expressed her shyness. I had also observed by her body language at the time that she was reticent; therefore, not having an entirely structured agenda on the day enabled everyone to participate at their own level of comfort.

In this study I was working in the relational space as facilitator; moving; performing; directing; holding the women in that space; being emotionally present. As a participant, I was performing as part of the community; and as researcher I was being reflexive, reflecting in action; scanning to notice how participants were being impacted by what was happening; and making internal (often split second) decisions on who to observe.

Working in this relational space while being aware of the impact on the participants; I chose Tina at the next festival of Lughnasadh. After the immersion at Lough Lugh, Tina had jumped up on a rock and spontaneously screamed out a primal scream from the depths of what she was feeling at that time. At Samhain I observed Patsy as Druid as she conducted the Moon ceremony blessings; giving reverence to the Earth and to nature. At the Winter Solstice, I observed Ursula who at the time was facing challenges with her disabilities, reflecting on how she and we provided accommodation for her inclusion. And at Imbolc, I observed Patricia, who is a bio energy healer, describe how she could feel the energy present at Uisneach.

Participating in rituals produces an energy through which transformation may take place. 'Like all real art, ritual provides organic order, a pattern of dynamic expression, through which the energy of an event or sense of events can flow, an evolution process towards larger meaning or a new stage or level in life' (Fisher, 2010, p.25). Farmer (2004) whose work focuses on creating your own ritual ceremonies for honouring the spiritual nature of certain milestones, suggests that there are three types of ritual ceremonies; one for healing; one for marking transitions; and one for celebrations.

I and the other women devised our own rituals throughout the journey to mark the celebration of the individual Festival of the Seasons. These rituals took the form of gathering in a circle; sometimes around fire; reading poetry, playing music, dancing; creating, facilitating; immersing in the lake; blessing of the ancestor's ceremony; interwoven with communal poetry, song, dance, chanting, and making.

According to Berry (2015) 'Ritual provides a framework in which powerful emotions can be confronted and expressed. It allows participants to enter a space beyond words, where symbols, bodily movement and symbolic action are the vehicles of meaning,' (p.94). Berry highlights the importance of structuring rituals as safe spaces, within which, the participant can be empowered to transcend socially constructed cultural expectations to express their authentic emotions.

My context-specific study invited the women to participate in safe space participative rituals offering liminal threshold rites of passage to negotiate their identity as older women. They were invited to gather at a geoliminal place; to enter a liminal space; and to step into liminal rites of passage.

## 5.7 Reflective Journal and Reflective Practice

As a means of collecting data in qualitative research (Jansick, 1999) reflective journals are an effective way to obtain information about a person's feelings (Cohen et al., 2007). Reflective journals can facilitate reflexivity as to how we interpret, reflect, and make sense

of our feelings; while exercising introspection about our own ideals, behaviours, and life experiences. Researchers are urged to talk about themselves, 'their presuppositions, choices, experiences, and actions during the research process,' (Mruck and Breuer, 2003, p.3).

From a methodological perspective, keeping a reflective journal and knowing how to use the reflections is an integral part of the research process. Phelps (2005) notes the data from reflective journals provide significant insights not always achieved through other ways of data collection; while Gibbs (1988) philosophises that through reflecting on experiences, 'generalisations or concepts can be generated. And it is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively,' (p.9).

Ortlis (2008) highlighted the advantages of keeping and using reflective journals in the qualitative research process stating that it was:

Through written reflections in my journal that I clarified my research aims and approach where I asked, explored, and answered ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions about what I could know, my relationship to what could be known, and how I might come to know it (p.700).

As researchers, Coffey (1999) notes that we 'bring our prior knowledge and understanding of the theories and frameworks relevant to that particular study [...] we also bring a self which is, among other things, gendered, sexual, occupational, generational - located in time and space,' (p. 158). Le Croix (2016) concurs identifying that:

[...] reporting on one's own experiences requires self-reflection which in turn requires careful thought about one's own behaviour, experiences, and beliefs. Self-reflection requires the capacity to exercise introspection and leads to inquiry into the human condition and human consciousness. This requires stepping back from an experience and considering how one thought or acted, but at the same time, immersing oneself in the event and reliving the experience in all its dimensions (p.4).

Reflecting on being my own research participant, I am physically present and affective within the women's world; where we, as participants, journey together through liminal spaces and rituals. Employing introspective analysis, I was aware of how my personal



presence may affect the research; therefore, I constantly reflected, conscious of my influence on the women, of my footprints on the data. Autoethnography deliberately reflects and I am reflexive. I acknowledge my role as facilitator, participant, and researcher; and how I impact on the study; my bias; and my interpretation of analysis. I am aware of the researcher's self and interaction with others; and the importance of my social identity, of who I am (Goffman, 1959, 2004).

While I am conscious that autoethnography is a way of being in the world; and that human experience can be read as social texts (Van Maanen, 2011); I was surprised at how deeply I needed to self-reflect at the outset of this project. I found that I needed to consciously understand the vulnerability and responsibility that I felt realising that how I live my life will be known by others; and how the women's lives will also be known through my writing.

As a social care practitioner, I had honed my reflective skills in the 'doing of social care'. Understanding one's own emotions, mind-set, prejudices, assumptions, and bias is imperative when working in the life space of the people we support. Being self-aware and having a critical reflexivity are at the essence of effective social care work. Self-reflection also helps develop critical consciousness. By reflecting upon structural barriers such as class, status, privilege, internalised oppression, and others; self-reflection is the mechanism that leads to insights, moments of clarity and epiphanies. Berry (2013) exposes that reflexivity can be seen as a spinning metaphor, meaning that we will never be in the same space as when we arrived, it is in the spinning that we arrived with an altered sense of identity supporting us to make sense of shifting relational meanings in changing contexts.

After each of the festivals, I wrote down what I surmised as critical happenings which took place at that event. What happened in that moment? What exactly did the participants mean when they say, did, or asked? What exactly did it mean to me? How could I understand it and make sense of it? I reflected on how I was feeling about these critical thoughts and on how I would analyse the happenings. Writing a reflective diary helped me to try and make sense of the happenings. My thoughts were non-chronological, layered, interjected, non-linear and messy. I used my reflective journal to go back and forth to 'happenings' to develop a schema, to try and make connections and understand my relationship to what could be known.

Keeping a reflective journal and using it to write up the research enabled an iterative, cyclical process of creation and critical reflection constructed through retrospection, introspection, and interpretation. In choosing to make my experiences, reflections and feelings visible; my 'writing as a method of inquiry' (Richardson, 1994, p. 516) spun to make sense of the shifting contexts.

### 5.8 Field Notes

According to Bryman (2012) field notes are 'fairly detailed summaries of events and behaviour and the researcher's initial reflections on them' (p.447). In discussing the role of the field note diary; Punch (2012) acknowledges that in detailing descriptions of what the researcher sees, hears, and experiences; and their immediate reflection on those experiences; the researcher can 'scrutinise their personal challenges and emotions in relation to the research process,' (p. 87). Writing field notes at that precise time of happening, enables one's initial analytic thoughts about what is happening, what is being observed and heard at that time; to be formulated as data.

Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater, (2012) describe what may be included in field notes:

Date, time, and place of observation [...] Specific facts, numbers, details [...] Sensory impressions: sights, sounds, textures, smells, tastes [...] Responses to the act of recording fieldnotes [...] Specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations, and insider language [...] Questions about people or behaviors at the site for future investigation [...] Continuous page-numbering system for future reference (p.83).

The Festivals of the Seasons were mostly day long, or happened over many hours and therefore, I was able to record field notes throughout the day. I wrote my field notes briefly on site immediately after my participant observation, (e.g., Tina let out a scream which innately came from her whole being, Lughnasadh 2017); and added to them later in reflection and analysis. Taking notes in the field gave me the flexibility of on-the-spot recording what the atmosphere was like, and if I thought it was relevant to the data to include the smells, sounds and taste of the space.

Onsite at each of the festivals, I embodied a presence which was physically and emotionally present to everyone; subconsciously, I believe; using my social care skills, of 'holding' a situation. At the same time, I was cognisant that I was also taking an emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996) 'helicopter view' of what was happening; being aware and empathetic to

what was happening for the women at that ritual; with what was happening for me; and balancing that with what was happening overall on this physical and metaphorical journey.

Being emotionally tuned into the moment and what was occurring the moment; I jotted down things that I felt were pivotal, trying to describe 'happenings'; what was happening as it was happening in the moment. I called these occurrences in moments of time, 'critical happenings.' Making brief field notes of what happened, I later reflected, asking myself questions about what had happened, trying to analyse the situation, or the 'critical happening.' For example, what had happened at the Bealtaine Ritual for Sharon to be encouraged to share her poem? What exactly happened for Tina when she stood up on the rock at Lughnasadh and unleashed a primal scream from the bottom of her soul? These questions will be explored in more depth in the analysis chapter of this thesis.

Field notes have the advantage of written details of a 'happening' in the moment or shortly afterwards, while the sounds, smells and ambiance of the experience is clearly painted in the mind. One can be reflective as an initial response as the happening occurs and reflect later. What became evident during the journey was that, although I had planned to knit together the six research methods strands of autoethnography; poetic inquiry; interviews; my reflective journal; participant observation; field notes; and interviews as the research methodology; the voluminous production of artefacts also needed to be included as tools of discovery. The production of artefacts, therefore, was registered as another method of gathering data and analysis.

## 5.9 Production of Artefacts

Over the year long journey through participation in the Celtic Festivals, we explored our experiences of time, space, ritual, and place (May and Thrift, 2001). As we stepped off the edge at the beginning of the journey; an organic happening had already occurred; the women began to respond to the question of their identity through their respective working medium. While they answered through poems and reflections in their poetry journal; they shaped their interpretation of their lived experiences in the medium they usually worked

in; and were used to working in. Thus, the production of artefacts became synonymous with the journey.

Díaz-Kommonen et al. (2004) states that an:

[...] artefact is a term that is used to refer to items created or resulting from human action and activity as well as a central concept in the study of practice. Practice is often seen as the production of artefacts, and artefacts themselves are seen in a simple light, as mere objects. Yet, artefacts embody meaning in various ways (p.1).

The women who were artists created art. For Bealtaine, Rosemarie and Tina replied to poetic inquiry by creating their poems within an art piece, poemarts, one embedded in encaustic wax and the other life mapped. Aine, who as a musician works through music, created her replies through poetry and created original musical compositions in response to my poems. As we journeyed through the festivals, the women organically decided to facilitate their interpretations through workshops and rituals; some took the form of communal dance, chant, song. Gift giving became another organic happening; some of the women painted stones, gave gifts of oak trees, gave paintings, and made jewellery. Gifting the painted stones to the women became a way of 'being there' without being there.

### 5.10 Art based inquiry

Chamberlain et al., (2018) identifies that in using arts-based methodologies and methods that allow for creative expression; knowledge can be obtained that may otherwise remain obscured or covert. Through art-based methods we can gain better access to the emotional, affective, and embodied realms of life; cultivate empathy; and challenge and provoke audiences to engage with complex and difficult social issues. Leavy (2015) concurs, theorising that it is through art-based practices and inquiry that we can learn to understand experience.

The artefacts produced contained anthropological, cultural, sociological, and communicative meanings for the women who created them; also for older women in society; and for society itself. Analysing the artefacts, I asked myself, what knowledge were these artefacts making? How was I going to interpret it? And what analysis tools or inquiry would I use to interpret it?

Makala (2007) notes that:

Within the frame of practice-led approach, artefacts have been conceived both as answers to particular research questions and as argumentation on the topic concerned [...] an artefact can embody a greater range of roles: as an object made by an artist–researcher during the process of research, it can also be seen as a method of collecting and preserving information and understanding (p.158).

The making and products of making are seen as an essential part of research. I was personally aware of basic artwork interpretation through prisms of colours, parts, and textures; observing, explaining, taking into consideration its shape, colour, texture; and if anything is written or painted on it. What knowledge comes from the artefact? What context was it made in? How does one make sense of it? And how can we interpret new knowledge from artefacts?

Reflecting on how the production of artefacts produces new knowledge; Biggs posits that it is through the interpretation of the object that its knowledge becomes embodied; emphasising that staging the object in a certain context also affects how the object is interpreted (Biggs 2002, p. 20).

In this study, one can trace the triggering semiotics of a 'pattern of meaning'. Investigating the product, creation and artwork 'has to be accompanied by an analysis related to the emotional value and the intrinsic signification of the object' (Chimenz, 2008, p.3437). Regarding the artefacts produced during this research process; my aim was to identify explicit and tacit themes or signifiers emerging from the cultural semiotics (Caesar,1999; Eco, 1976, 1986; Foucault, 1970); and analyse those signifiers in the context of women, ageing and identity in contemporary Ireland.

### 5.11 Data Analysis

The data analysis technique used for this study was thematic analysis. Braun and Clark's (2006) six phase thematic analysis processes were conducted to identify patterns in older women's lived experience and exploration of ageing and identity in contemporary Ireland. The analysis of those patterns enabled me, as the researcher, participant, and facilitator; to gain an insight into participants' subjective experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

To create the thematic analysis framework, once I became familiar with the data, I began coding, identifying what I thought were meaningful responses from the women under the questions and grouping those responses together in themes. In the second phase I made notes on my decisions to select certain responses, why I had thought those specific responses were meaningful statements. This reflectiveness informed the next stage of coding. Reviewing the responses selected based on the similarity of concepts conveyed, I then organised those responses into clusters across the three sections of ageing, identity and time, space, ritual, and place; until all responses had been placed. Finally, clusters of similar responses were grouped into larger themes. All were reviewed and edited, and themes and sub themes decided on (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

To code the common ideas, I typed up the diary entries, saved them as a word document and then analysed the data using thematic content analysis looking at words and phrases to elicit themes. Maxwell and Miller (2012) refer to this approach as the development of theoretical categories which 'place the coded data into a more general or abstract framework. These categories may be derived [...] from prior theory,' (p. 113).

When a typed transcript of each interview was completed, I read it through repeatedly to form a general impression, and to search for developing themes. When the interview transcripts became familiar, I developed a preliminary coding of the data, colour coding the emerging themes. Coding is described as a mechanism for thinking about the meaning of the data and for reducing the vast amount of data (Huberman and Miles, 1994). Coding was initially carried out by hand on the printed transcripts, until a choice of themes and focuses was identified.

Braun and Clarke (2006) categorise the coding phases as:

1. Familiarising yourself with your data, by reading, rereading, and writing down initial ideas
2. Generating initial codes Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code
3. Searching for themes Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme

4. Reviewing themes Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis
5. Defining and naming themes Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report (p.87)

Regarding the interviews, narrative analysis was used to analyse the experiences and answers the women gave in response. Bryman (2004, p.413) describes narrative analysis as 'an approach to the analysis of qualitative data that emphasises the stories that people employ to account for events'. Answers were then divided into meaningful phrases and sentences by thematic analysis, which is a model of narrative analysis that has an emphasis on what is said rather than how it is said (Riessman, 2002). The results for the two sections of questions, the before question and the questions after the journey; were analysed to decide what the significant themes were. The identification of these recurring themes which had developed; and the associations between themes were then used to present the findings.

Hogan, Dolan, and Donnelly (2009) extoll the value of qualitative research as a multifaceted approach that investigates culture, society and behaviour through an analysis and synthesis of people's words and actions. Basit (2003) notes that qualitative data is unstructured, textual, and non-numerical, highlighting that 'qualitative researchers believe that only qualitative data respect the complexity, subtlety and detail of human interactions,' (p.146). Concurring Flick (2002) identifies that qualitative methods can help us to better understand a phenomenon in each community or setting; since research findings are inevitably influenced by the socio-cultural background of participants.

When coding, relevant phenomena is noticed, examples collected and later analysed to find commonalities, differences, and patterns (Seidel and Kelle, 1995). With regards to the coding of the interviews; I was aware and had trained in various software options to organise data (e.g., NVivo). However, for me personally, setting out the typed manuscripts out on the ground and colour coding the themes; was the way I have always worked with qualitative data. It is my inclination and expertise which prompted this way of coding and I'm comfortable with; and comforted by; this ritual of coding. Although I could quote

verbatim from each of the women's interviews; I wanted to soak in and feel again their narratives and the emerging phenomena.

The creative methods of arts-based research provided a rich repository of data in which I had to code and categorise according to themes. This study's collaborative methods of co-production (dance/music/song/chants); co-construction (communal poetry); co-design (workshops); and co-creation (communal acrylic pour art pieces); were conducted in such an interpretive 'flowy' manner that it led to data being developed and elicited in a unique way. This multimodal methodology generated a voluminous amount of qualitative data under seven different research method strands; six of which were planned for the collection of data – autoethnography, poetic inquiry, field notes, reflective journal, participant observation and interviews; and as noted above; one research method which emerged organically through the journey of the study - the production of various art-based research artefacts.

The framework on which these seven research methods strands were interwoven was devised because of the close trusting relationships I have with the women (see Figure 2 and Figure 3 below). I had worked with them previously and I felt that my experience and competence with using poetic inquiry in my previous research could be translated to this study.





Figure 2: Heptagonal Methodological Model



Figure 3: Heptagonal Methodological Model within the Lens, Context and Content triangle

## 5.12 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the Heptagonal Methodological Model applied to the gathering and analysis of the primary research data. It outlined the research design along with the methods employed to collect data. It considered the reliability, validity, and ethical considerations relevant to the study. The findings of the research and the themes that developed through autoethnography, the interviews, through poems, field notes, reflective journals, participant observation and the production of artefacts are presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6: Analysis/Findings

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of the study's key findings and discusses the themes which developed in relation to the pertinent literature and theoretical perspectives in the field. As outlined above, data was gathered in relation to older women's lived experiences of ageing and identity in Ireland in Irish society. This data was analysed by the inductive and iterative process of thematic analysis; where themes and patterns were identified within the data; as explored above. This chapter is structured into three main sections:

1. Older women Ageing in, and with Ireland: The Postcolonial Influence
2. Participating in Rituals in Geogendered Landscape
3. Reclaiming Identity by Triskelic Journeying

In this decade of postcolonial commemoration of independence in Ireland (2012-2023); the impetus to research, retell and reclaim women's stories; which historically had been written out or silenced under patriarchal structures; has gathered momentum. However, alongside the Nation's quest to redress the erasure of women's stories; is the convergence of the unearthing of women's stories of incarcerate and punitive measures imposed on them in Magdalene Laundries (Ryan, 2009; McAleese, 2013); and in the Mother and Baby homes (Government of Ireland, 2021); and at the hands of the Catholic Church and Irish state collusion. Simultaneously, horrific failures within the health system for women in Ireland were exposed by the stories of Savita, Natasha, and Vicky (Savita Halapanaveer (HSE, 2013); Natasha Perie (P.P -v- Health Service Executive [2014]), Vicky Phelan (O, Loughlin, 2022)); names which remain omnipresent in the Irish psyche; as I explored in the literature review chapter of this thesis.

I found the juxtaposition of Savita, Natasha and Vicky's stories emerging alongside the state's quest to commemorate women's stories disturbing; akin at times, to a violent collision of tectonic plates crashing into each other.

I thought about these women often; and imagined their presence as a spectral seeping through the woven mesh of time from the Otherworld; their embroidered faces appearing

and unravelling on the brocade of commemoration. It is within this postcolonial context of patriarchal Ireland that I began to explore older women's ageing and identity.

In 2014 (my fiftieth year); I had begun to explore my own ageing through my poetry, various art-based mediums, and performance art; in what I now realise was a distillation period of reflection. One such performance was *The Bog Queen Immersion* (Coyle and McKenna, 2016) in which I immersed myself in the peaty brown waters of the midlands bog to perform a cathartic cleansing ritual. Washing my body in the bog water, stripping away the social construction of what society determines an older woman should be; enabled me to embody the mythological mantle of the Earth Goddess, the Bog Queen; she who rests beneath the laid down layers of organic peat. Performing this ritual, in what I also now understand as an autoethnographic art performance; disrupted the neoliberal narrative of what it means to be an older woman in Irish society in terms of value and production; while simultaneously disrupting the residual impact of the historical subjugation of women in Ireland. This was the kindling that lit the fire for the pursuit of a more communal exploration of older women's ageing and identity and birthed this PhD study and journey.

Throughout my research within the contextual arena of what I call the Geogendered landscape of Uisneach as being a geographical, mythological, and spiritual space whose historiography imbues feminist concepts of equality; and through participative rituals; a liminal theatre was created; one in which, we as older women; acted out the storying of our lived experiences of ageing; leading to the negotiation and renegotiation of our identity.

Honouring the Goddess Ériu through collaborative rituals of fire burning ceremonies; we took on her mythological mantle; eventually embodying Ériu through our poetry, song, music, chanting and dance performances. Immersing communally at Lughnasadh in the lake at Lough Lugh enabled the stripping away of the social construction of how we, as older women, are seen in Irish society. Situated in Geogendered landscape; in a portal of awakening space; a *Communitas of Sisterhood* evolved; which led to our renegotiations of self; and the restorying of our communal identity as older women. By Triskelic journeying; to the Self; with the *Communitas of Sisterhood*; and in the Geogendered landscape; transformation took place.

As Ylanne (2012) attests, ageing and identity are inextricably linked. To understand who I truly am, I realised that to move forward, I had to journey back. To truly recognise who we are as a *Communitas of Sisterhood*; we had to journey across millennia of sociocultural Timespaces in Ireland.

Through the Celtic Goddess Ériu, we journeyed through the opaqueness of postcolonial and intergenerational shame and mistrust; tracing how we as older women ended up as other in contemporary Ireland. To understand who I am; and to sit in my own authenticity, I had to go inwards; deeper than any journey I have ever taken; deep into the Otherworld of my consciousness; to make meaning of what I believe is my identity. As I will explore in the remainder of this chapter; we voiced our feelings around our lived experiences as older women through the expressive medium of poetry; our own and poems we created collaboratively; and through the navigation of the rituals; we individually and collectively; negotiated and renegotiated our identity.

What became evident to me during this journey was that we, subliminally; somatically; and possibly epigenetically; carry the weight of the historical; sociocultural; legislative; religious; and political subjugation; trauma and shaming of women.

It was only when I was reflecting on my ageing and identity and the relationship between them; that I realised my ageing was steeped in the harrowing stories of how women and girls were treated in Ireland; steeped in, what Moglen referred to as 'images of the past, present, lost, embodied, and imagined selves' (p. 303-304). This was perplexing and I questioned why or how their stories became part of my ageing; or indeed, part of my identity.

Vicarious trauma and intergenerational shame can seep into societal consciousness; and I wondered if the women who were born in; and grew up in Ireland; also felt the weight of other women's lived experiences in postcolonial Ireland.

The eighties were a particularly brutal time for women in Ireland. One girl's story embedding forever in my consciousness; seared through my heart; her hurt into my hurt. In 1984, when 15-year-old student Ann Lovett died giving birth beside a grotto (dedicated to the virgin Mary) in a town just 53 km (33 miles) from my hometown; I was 19 years old. The visualisation of Ann and her baby dying in the Grotto, (as the Christy Moore song 2004

says, everybody knew, nobody said) imprinted on my mind and I carry her always with me. Thinking about it, when I emigrated to London in the eighties, she came too. When I returned to Ireland in 2000, she was also with me. Her presence is with me now almost forty years later.

In 2012 the first year of the decade of commemoration, when Savita Halappanavar died from sepsis because of a mismanaged miscarriage (Holland and O Dowd, 2022); I was 48 years old. In 2014 when the Tuam baby scandal broke; and the Irish High Court ruled that Natasha Perie's life support could be turned off; I was 50. In 2022, when Vicky Phelan died; I was 58. My ageing journey is timelined by these women's lives and deaths - Ann, Savita, Natasha, Vicky; and the thousands of women who experienced the atrocities of the Magdalene Laundries; and Mother and Baby homes. My body acting as a living repository like the bog, soggy, organic, container of a multitude of secrets; soaked in their stories.

My study takes a cultural gerontological perspective underpinned by a feminist intersectional creative methodological approach to explore the lived experience of older women in Ireland. In order to connect my personal experiences of being an older woman to the wider sociocultural meanings and understandings; I needed to delve deep in reflection; to dig beneath the layers of laid down bog that I carry in my psyche; to peel back the layers of patriarchal power structures that I grew up in; lived through and performed in; to deconstruct the socially constructed norms of how I perceived I am; and thus, other older women; are viewed in contemporary Irish society.

As far back as 1966, Tierney indicated that 'autoethnography confronts dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflective response, representational spaces that have marginalized those of us at the borders,' (p. 66). In this study the women participants who grew up in Ireland grew up under the dual dominant patriarchal narrative of Church and state. Growing up in spaces of inequality and injustice (Butler, 2010) where women's participation in public life and public sector was either non-existent or limited; we performed being girls and young women. Now we are performing as older women.

My reflection led to ask:

If we were to scrape beneath the surface of our skin, the veneer of our landscape, the scab of the depths of secrets in our bogs; can we acknowledge the intergenerational shame of being a woman, a leaky, bloody, fruitful woman? (Caroline, Reflective Diary, Pre-Bealtaine, 2017)

### 6.1.1 Older Women Ageing, in and with Ireland: The Postcolonial Influence

As explored in the literature review, the fierce copulation of the Catholic Church and state, sealed tight the fate for the rights of women in Ireland; giving rise to the legislature controlling policies and regulation of women's bodies in relation to their reproduction and sexuality. In this postcolonial space of independent Ireland; the collusion of the Catholic Church and the Irish state combined to create a patriarchal political ideology of Madonification as Nation. The Catholic Church operated under a philosophy of imposing dominance, shame and guilt on women. While the state legislatively aligned with the Catholic Church's ideals to enslave nationally and project globally; the concept of Irish woman as Nation, sexless, virginal, and chaste. Contextually, this sets the sociocultural theatre of living into which; in this study; most of the women, including myself, were born into.

Findings from my study revealed that for the participants in this study, the women and I; exposure to societal normalisation of generations of Irish women living a guarded life, under explicit and nuanced patriarchal forces; becoming invisible and othered; shaped how we, as older women, feel about our identity. It is now at this time in our lives, in the third age stage; 'when the train has stopped at the station' and 'the caring for others is all done' (Participant Tina, Poetry notebook, May 2017); that we have an opportunity to reflect on our identity as older women.

As highlighted in the literature review, the dominant social construct in the western world in relation to older women is one of decline narratives (Baltes and Baltes, 1990; Rowe and Kahn, 1998). Consequently, in exploring older women's identity, many feminist age studies researchers found the invisibility of older women in the media to be a common theme (Gullette 1997, 2017; Chivers, 2011; Marshall and Katz, 2006; Jennings, 2015, 2017;

Jennings and Ore-Piqueras, 2016; Jennings and Grist, 2017). What is visible is the concept of the successful, productive, valued ager; which feminist researchers such as Calasanti and King (2011); Katz (2001/2002, 2013); Rubinstein and de Medeiros (2015) and Marshall (2017) have criticised as a neoliberal trope (Rowe and Kahn, 1998).

The concept of being a successful ager as an older woman by keeping youthful is paradoxical. To be rated as a successful ager, society deems that you must retain your youthfulness, e.g., you must hardly have aged at all. Therefore, for older women, being successful at ageing equates to being successful at not ageing. Reflecting on quandaries such as this evoked many questions as I went back and forth between the literature; my lived experiences; and my investigation into my sense of identity. Why is it that society determines the valuation of the older woman? and why is my evaluation of self not considered in this transaction? Concurring with Rubinstein and de Medeiros (2015) and Marshall (2017); my personal philosophy and the location of my study in a feminist intersectional approach criticises the successful ager paradigm for its lack of consideration to the ecological thinking and sociocultural upbringing in a person's life - of illness, disabilities, traumas, or negative lived experiences.

As we explored our identity through participative rituals; our innate creativity was unleashed. Distillation of our narratives, reflections, poems, art, dance, music, and production of artefacts became; through the process of creation; our interpretation to self; and through the production; the presentation of our renegotiated self, became known to others; which meant that the revealing and enactment of our authentic self was first witnessed within the *Communitas* of Sisterhood. This act of our authentic self-becoming known to self; and in doing so, becoming visible to the other women; became an act of activism; causing the positional narratives of older women as invisible; and the trope of successful ageing and ageing as decline; to be disrupted.

With regards to the trope of older women's invisibility in the media (Sontag, 1972; Greer, 1970, 1992, 2017; Gullette, 2004; Segal, 2013; and Woodward, 1999, 2016); the women and I who had grown up in Ireland; felt that we had lived in an era where women had been silenced; and that in the sociocultural context of contemporary Ireland, vestiges of older women's invisibility still remain.



Without a voice and without agency, one becomes invisible, and Anne tells us that we 'fade into the wall' (Anne, Pre Bealtaine, 2017 interview); and that residue is most predominant in the social construction norm of the older women as invisible in Irish society. Whilst this study acknowledges that the foundations for a cultural shift to be recalibrated for women's equality in all the power structures is evolving in Ireland; the dregs of structural patriarchy, prejudice and discrimination are still prevalent.

In asking older women, and myself, '*How did we feel about our identity as ageing women in Ireland*'? I understood that this question would initiate a deep exploration of the self through our life experiences of ageing; as explored above in the research methods chapter. However, I could not have comprehended the power that hinged on the question asked. The question itself acted as a permission granted; the floodgates opened with an outpouring of how we felt about our ageing; the discourses of our lived experiences; with the resultant exploration of our sense of identity cascading through. Within our *Communitas of Sisterhood*; the shackles of what a socially constructed older woman in Ireland is understood to be, were thrown off.

The energy of the festivals moved at a different pace throughout the year, coordinating with nature's cyclical time. At the celebration of the first three festivals; at first, the voicing of our experiences was a torrential force; roaring like the River Shannon which runs through the middle of our town, pouring furiously over the weir wall. From the Stepping off the Edge stage at Bealtaine; where we ventured together into the unknown; to the transformative stage of the Immersion in Lough Lugh at Lughnasadh where we reached into the depths of our soul and birthed the emergence of a *Communitas of Sisterhood*; to the Honouring of the Ancestors Rising of the Moon Ritual and enclosing ourselves in the womb of the tomb of the Goddess Ériu at Ail na Mireann, (The Catstone) at Samhain - our initial encounters and discussions of lived experiences were torrential and forceful.

A more reflective stage became evident in the following two festivals on our journey; the Winter Solstice and Imbolc. Visualising this stage as a body of water flowing downstream, (the River Shannon had risen its waters at this time); the flow of my reflections surfacing in swirling eddies of thought.

At the Winter Solstice in December; we celebrated the Celtic new year with the Druids, sharing food, music, poetry, and friendship. It seemed as if we had settled into deep reflection; our body clocks slowing to a contemplation stage in synchronisation with nature. The poetry created, specifically the collaborative poetry, evidences this reflective stage.

Throughout the journey; the *Communitas of Sisters* worked in a supportive and strengths-based approach reverting to a traditional Irish way of working called *Meitheal* (*Meitheal*, an old Irish term is culturally understood as a gathering of people coming together to work cooperatively on a task in a supportive and strengths-based approach). With reference to Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (1989) which asserts that people are often disadvantaged by multiple markers of identity which informs the other (for example, an older woman with a physical disability); the *Sisterhood* automatically took an intersectional stance; and the work we were creating together fell organically into *Meitheal* mode.

At *Imbolc* in February, after the winter hibernation period, we gathered in the coldness at the well in Killare, a few minutes from *Uisneach*, to honour the Goddess *Brigid*. Later that day at the visitor's centre cottage at *Uisneach*; we settled in *Meitheal* as *Ursula* led her workshop making *Brigid's Crosses*. Working together in this space; at times in silence; we ritualistically threaded the coloured thread under and over the reeds to form the three-armed crosses (see figure 4). Gathering in *Meitheal* to honour the returning of the light is symbolic to the mind, body, soul connection to self and others.



*Figure 4: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Brigid Crosses made at Imbolc workshop*

Throughout the yearlong journey, in that dedicated space and time, and in the in-between spaces which formed organically; the discourse centred on our lived experiences of ageing. Like the moving body of the river, there was no stopping the forces of energy unleashed within us; as we journeyed through ritual, with the Sisterhood, and into the landscape. Unpacking our own experiences as ageing women who grew up in Ireland; our discourse weaved in and out of our life experiences growing up in Ireland; how we navigated systems of patriarchy; how our mothers and grandmothers navigated through life; and how we felt as ageing women. Some of the women shared their experiences of leaving Ireland to live in the UK; and how they felt about ageing in a home to home. Others had come to live in Ireland and shared their experiences of being migrant and emigrant ageing women.

During the process of this journey the voicing and releasing of our poetic reflections of identity in a space, place, and time, a TimeSpace (May and Thrift, 2010) in the mythology of the landscape; became part of the ritual. Using the prism of poetry to reflect; we negotiated and renegotiated our identity; writing our feelings and experiences through our own poems and collaboratively with the Sisters. As I will explore below, at the Stepping off the Edge into the Unknown Stage at Bealtaine; some of the poems were also captured in paintings, poemarts, merging mediums in their expression of feelings. This creative expression through art-based mediums helped us make sense of the potentially Transformational Stage of the Immersion at Lough Lugh; and the deeply reflective stages of The Winter Solstice and Imbolc; and any newly constructed self-knowledge stage throughout and after the journey. From the first ritual onwards, we began to utilise the creative and expressive mediums we were traditionally used to working in, to connect with, and communicate our feelings.

At Samhain, as we gathered at an Honouring the Ancestors ceremony; Patsy, a visual installation artist who created the installation of Eriu's head; gave us a blessing. Patsy had gifted each one of us with plants to bring home and take care of, to nourish and grow, and return later to embed the trailing plants into Eriu's head as her living hair (see figure 5).



*Figure 5: Photo Caroline Coyle (2017) Goddess Ériu at Samhain*

As each of the women led us in the art medium that they normally work in; we fell naturally into gift giving. Janice led us in a communal dance; Aine led us in music; Tina painted the triskelion onto stones for us to carry on her behalf at Samhain. 'Carry me in the Stones' she said as she gifted the stones to me to give to the women on the day (Tina, October 2017). At the final Bealtaine Festival 2018 celebration, Rosemarie gifted each one of us with a triskelion pendant. The triskelion, while occupying a sacred symbol connotation within the Sisterhood, now became elevated to that of a talisman that would connect us in Sisterhood on our journey and on our future life journey as we re-entered society in authentic identity. We shared our feelings regarding the imposition of societal norms of hegemonic dominance; the silencing of our girl voices; the social norms set out by the Catholic church

and the Irish state which remained in force as we entered womanhood the impact of intergenerational inequality towards women, our mothers and grandmothers as we entered elderhood; the invisibility of the older woman as potential role models in the media and the predominantly patriarchal power structures still existing in Irish society.

As I explored in my pre-Bealtaine reflective diary:

I'm 51 now and as I get older, I think of how my mother and women of her generation had to leave work when they married. I remember my mother talking about how she had to give up work in the printing works when she got married. She speaks about that job with such affection, she really loved it there and she was getting on so well there. Mam is only twenty years older than me so I can't imagine what it must have been like to have to give up your work at 19 years, and of course that ties into your identity as well. In the Catholic religion, when women married in the sixties, like my mother did, the women were literally now in the clutches of Church and state legislation; forced to be financially dependent on their husband, forced into a marriage of procreation and forced to give up any sense of identity that they could have had within the labour force (Caroline, Pre Bealtaine, 2017).

From the diasporan Irish women's perspectives, two of the participants, Sharon, and Bridie, had grown up in Ireland and emigrated to the UK forty years ago. Their lived experiences of emigration recounted trying to decipher and negotiate their identity in a new culture; while at the same time, still carrying their emotional backpack of women enslaved to Church, state and Madonification as Nation. Sharon and Bridie spoke about the complexities of ageing in a duality concept of home and the emotional quandaries evoked by continuously endeavouring to straddle that duality.

The two migrant women in this study, Erica, and Janice, grew up in the United Kingdom (UK) but were now ageing in Ireland. They spoke about the perceived differences in their lived experiences of girl child into womanhood in the UK in relation to the other women participants' lived experiences of growing up in postcolonial Ireland. They both reflected how their experiences of growing up in the sociocultural context of the UK, influenced their perspectives of how to cope with perceived inequality, ageism, and the social construction of older women in Irish society.

Erica and Janice's reflections informed that they were more cognisant of the patriarchal nuances of inequality and discrimination towards women in Ireland. Acknowledging that they both grew up in a more secular and equal society for women in the UK; outside of the religious, legislative, and cultural restrictions binding women who have grown up in Ireland, from garnering agency within their society. They both spoke about how strongly they would address inequalities and perceived injustices to women in Ireland. The impact of Erica and Janice's upbringing in a secular society, directly evidences Gullette's (2004) argument that we are aged by culture.

Thus, key findings from this study indicated that most of the women (both those who had grown up in Ireland and those who had not) felt that their voices continued to be silenced by the same structural institutions of power in Irish society. All acknowledged having experience in the older age of the heteronormative older woman missing from the media. Some of the women who had grown up in Ireland, reflected their life experiences of being gendered from an early age or living within patriarchal systems through their poetry. Other poetry and art reflected the women's lived experiences of navigating or journeying through to this third age stage as a time for transformation.

However, while Ruth also acknowledged the horrific inequalities and discrimination women faced in Ireland; she maintained that she always felt that she could do anything she wanted to do in life as she was raised to achieve anything she wanted to do. Ruth's reiteration of feeling she could do anything she wanted resonated with me, and I identified with that self-fulfilling prophecy characteristic of Ruth's identity, as I too felt that, in the chaos of learning to navigate and perform life through various patriarchal systems in Ireland, I had vowed to myself that I would do everything I could to achieve what I wanted to do in life. Without it being explicit to me as I was growing up; I had already committed to being an activist in the living of my own life. For the women who had not grown up in Ireland, they perceived themselves as activists in disrupting the patriarchal hegemonic social construction of older women in Irish society. I reflected on all the women participant's creations through poetry and art as being individual and communal acts of activism; which by their creation, disrupted the hegemonic narrative. Initial interviews conducted before embarking on the first festival, the Bealtaine festival in May 2017, gave

an indication of women's lived experiences. Tina sets the context of growing up in the 1970s, telling us, you were 'Told to stay quiet in school and by the Church,' (Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017). Anne elucidates that as a girl and woman it was a constant battle to be visible in society, arguing that 'You had to fight to be seen,' (Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

In her Pre-Bealtaine interview, Tina reflected on how she felt as an older woman describing herself as being the 'The invisible person who went into the wall,' (Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017). Researchers (Gullette, 2004; Liddy, 2014; Jennings and Krainitzki 2015; Grist and Jennings, 2017) equated the marginalisation of certain groups in society to their invisibility and lack of agency. Anne expresses a feeling of being without agency within the structures of power 'Going into banks and institutions, they were looking for the man,' (Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Peeling back the metaphorisation of the invisible older woman melting into the walls of patriarchal structures reveals a somatic internalisation of older women's perceived lack of visibility and agency in Irish society. This phenomenon inferred by the work of Collard-Stokes (2020); who identified that the invisibility of older women is connected to them experiencing discrimination, stigma, or barriers to social inclusion. These findings are further supported by Cullen and Corcoran's (2020) position that social, religious, and legislative power structures in Ireland have been (and still are) patriarchal.

'This is it, it's the beginning of the journey, the women and I stepped off the edge on 6<sup>th</sup> May at Uisneach, I'm not sure where this journey will take us, I only know we have to do it' (Caroline, Pre Bealtaine, 2017). From the moment we surrendered to the journey, we gave ourselves permission to claim our position as leading actors in our individual and collective journey.

One of the themes to develop was the lack of older women role models. In terms of older women's visibility in the media: Where have all the leading older female actors gone?

### 6.1.2 Airbrushed from the Media: Where have all the older female actors gone?

A lack of diversity in the images of older women in mediated culture, influences how older women are perceived (Gullette, 2004; Woodward 1991, 1999; Yläne, 2012; Furman, 2013). Whilst there exists a great deal of research on the social and cultural experiences of ageing for women in other western contexts (Gullette, 1997; Cruikshank, 2003; Twigg and Martin, 2015); there exists a paucity of robust evidence on older women's lived experiences of ageing in an Irish context (O'Shea and Conboy, 2015).

Research has evidenced; as explored in the literature review chapter; that a lack of authentic representation of older women in mediated culture perpetrates the neoliberal trope of older women's perceived lack of value in Western society (Jennings and Gardiner, 2012; Jennings, 2012; 2015; 2017; Jennings and Oro-Piqueras, 2016; Jennings and Grist, 2017). Foremost is the lack of older women appearing in film. Questioning this invisibility of older women in film, participant Ruth asks: where have all the older female actors gone? Noting that the older male actor is still accommodated on the screen, Ruth ponders on this inequity of representation in her interview:

A lot of the actresses that I used to see regularly on the cinema screen back in the 1980s have disappeared from the screens but the men I saw on the screens in the 80s are still around. One example, Harrison Ford, you can still see him on the screen, actresses like Deborah Winger and Jessica Lang, I haven't seen nor hide their hair from them for years. Meryl Streep seems to be the one exception to that rule. It is a little bit different on the stage (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

The trope, of not only does youth equal value in the productive sense, but that youth also equals beauty; has infiltrated and been reinforced by the media. Subsequently normalising the predominance of acting roles being offered to younger women to star alongside much older men. This trope is jarring to Ruth who interrogates a concept of beauty that older women possess, a beauty that is oppositional to the hegemonic narrative of youth equating beauty. She suggested:

Sort of away from physical beauty which changes over the years and personally I think some of the most beautiful women in the world are older women. Dame Helen Mirren has an extraordinary beauty about her, allied with an extraordinary intelligence and I think older women are beginning to stand up for themselves; I hope that is the case (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).



Ruth concurs with Edström's (2018) observations of 'the media buzz,' (p.77) of discrimination against older women when she argues that:

Older people need to stand up for themselves and say we are not going to be shoved off into invisibility and pushed off into homes, and when you reach the age of 40 you somehow no longer have anything to contribute and you no longer count (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

In Ireland that invisibility of older women extends to the economic, educational, religious, political, historical, and contemporary power structures. Anne tells us of her experience of invisibility doing business with financial institutions as they always referred to the man, suggesting that 'As an older woman in Ireland, now, today, I find you have to fight to be seen, when I had to deal with different financial institutions or things, they are looking for the man,' (Anne, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017). She questions whether the men, who continue to operate with this patriarchal approach, do they even know that they are doing it? Or has it been so endemic, indoctrinated by generations of social learning and societal norms that it is not evident? Anne recounts that 'We are kind of told to sit down, be quiet, don't talk. You don't know the men know, I don't think they know that they are doing it, but men kind of do it in every aspect,' (Anne, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Historically in Ireland, women have also disappeared from historical records, literature, and in some cases, with regards to the 1916 Easter rising, women have been erased from historical photographs of significance. Janice notes this erasure of the women who contributed to Ireland's independence who are written out of Irish history:

I did a project on Women in the Rising...the number of women that you just don't know. They are just all written out and the only people that write books about these women are women [...] And they are not taught in school. Constance Markowitz... there's 1 or 2 key figures but there were so many, many more women that sacrificed their lives (Janice, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Acknowledging the concerted effort of the decade of centenaries (2012-2023) to bring histories of women's contributions to the fore; Ruth, a historian, makes the point that women who were invisible for so long in Irish history are now being brought back into the public's consciousness. She suggests:

One of the things that worked out very well about the 1916 commemorations was the fact the women of 1916 were finally brought into

the spotlight having been kept out of it, having been airbrushed out of it in one case for the best part of 100 years (Ruth Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Consistent negativity attached to certain groups in society such as older women has the propensity to infiltrate the language of the media and filter through to the vernacular, our everyday use of language. Ruth reflects on contemporary Irish society's perspective of ageing as a negative term, particularly towards older women, perpetuating negative connotations for older people's use of the health service. She noted: 'We are a society which is ageing, again a negative term, like a ticking time bomb, a grey tsunami, like older people are going to destroy, the health service that is going to completely collapse under the weight of services,' (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017). Ruth makes the point that it is specifically ageing women who have contributed most to society across the lifecourse:

Older women who raised families, held down many different jobs, who contributed to making communities better [...] I think women need to be celebrated more in our society for all the work they do, and for all the invisible, that do so much work, that that actually keeps societies going and that is not always properly acknowledged (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Rejecting older women to the edge of society as unwanted and unbecoming, cements the societal acceptability of othering older women as a social norm. From the ringside, watching older women's sense of identity being consistently devalued in society propagates the trope of the worthlessness of ageing women. Without representation in the socially influential world of the media and arts, older women do not have a version of reality to construct themselves in or an Otherworld to define themselves in. Unmirrored in the theatre of real life, they become faceless, imageless, invisible, and meaningless living on the fringes of, and ageing in, the shadows of, society.

Framing older women positively in the media and arts substantiates social existence as a member of society. Excluding us from the life stage of worthiness framed us as 'other' which filters into the collective consciousness as a negative internalisation of older women. Consequently, as historically has evidenced for other marginalised groups, leading to a separateness, an otherness, stereotyping, and discrimination. This otherness has the potential to be internalised by girls and young women who, subsequently may internalise

it as their own self-fulfilling prophecy. In her interview, Chris proclaims that there is 'a sadness in not recognising a superficial beauty of youth favoured by society, to the detriment of ageing, it is losing out on the joy of ageing, the wealth of ageing, the generosity of ageing,' (Chris, Pre-Winter Solstice Interview, 2017).

In the literature review McDonagh (2017) stresses that it was less than 30 years ago in Ireland that a considerable proportion of Ireland's LGBTQIA community was criminalised. The stigma of being gay was widespread in the community, with women who were gay living under a double bind of invisibility. Ruth recounts her experience in her interview:

The other issue, from my own personal perspective, is the fact that I am gay. It was not so much in being a woman but was certainly a very male dominated society and one in which women were definitely not the equal citizens. It was also being gay in a society in which gay people were invisible and in the case of men of course regarded as criminals up until the 1990s. I think certainly until very recently lesbians in this country were all but invisible (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

From a third wave feminist intersectional perspective (Butler, 1990; Walker, 1992; Greer, 1999) becoming an older gay woman in Ireland potentially includes another layer of invisibility.

Major cultural, legislative and equality changes have taken place in Ireland and the women acknowledged the many changes, specifically the legalisation of same sex marriage (2015).

With regards to her own ageing, Ruth states:

It's something I don't personally think about, I think OK, I'm 50 plus but what the hell does it matter? I think it is what you feel. I've lived in a society that has changed for the better. I think it is a better society for women, it is a better society for gay and lesbian people. If you ask me the happiest day of my life it was the day of the marriage equality referendum. I still can't begin to describe the sheer joy that that vote brought to me... Love is something that is supposed to be for younger people, that again, are you allowed and able to show that you are in love when you are past a certain age, I think you should be and they did (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2022)

In relation to being devalued as an ageing woman by society Ruth disrupts that norm by operating in terms of valuing oneself in her statement, that it's not about one's age, it's about how one feels. Ruth asks an interesting question, is love supposedly for younger

people only? She uses the example of her bishop being an older female bishop, as an example of changes in Ireland's sociocultural and religious context:

In the field of spirituality, the fact that makes me proud is that an older woman, the very first female Bishop in Britain, or Ireland was consecrated not only for Ireland but for diocese in which I live, she is my Bishop and that make me very proud even if we did disagree on the subject of the marriage equality referendum (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2022).

With regards to ageing in the gay community in Ireland, Ruth acknowledges that while there has been significant changes and acceptance through the Thirty-Fourth Amendment to the Irish Constitution which paved the way for same-sex marriages to become legalised, there is still some way to go:

For older lesbians there is still a problem generally in the LGBT community and it is ageism...But I think Irish society has advanced in leaps and bounds, we still have some way to go but compared to where we were it is a much, much better society (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Findings suggest that when our authentic selves can be realised, we reclaim our sovereignty, our self-ownership, we gain agency and reclaim visibility.

### 6.1.3 Third Age Time: I've spent my time caring for others, but this time is mine

Some of the women spoke about how their mothers had to give up work when they got married and stay in the home, caring for their husband and children. The women spoke about the impact that it had on them as female children growing up in the home; and how in some cases; girls and women in Ireland were siloed into caring roles; not being allowed to be who they wanted to be continued across their lifetime. Tina says for example: 'All my life, I was the daughter, the girl, the mother, the wife, I looked after everyone else... Girls weren't prioritised for education... it wasn't the done thing in our time,' (Tina, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017). Anne concurs stating 'There was a sense of not being allowed to do what you wanted to do. Not being allowed by societal constraints, church, and state, to do what you would have wanted to do,' (Anne, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

There was also a sense of the cultural changes in terms of legislation of equality that are taking place during the women's lifetimes and the inherent benefits of those changes for future generations of women. These connotations were acknowledged during Pre-

Bealtaine interviews by several participants. Findings indicated a sense that the third age was a time for oneself after spending time caring for everyone else. Now as an older woman, one could begin to nurture the self. Rosemarie highlights the opportunities for women today:

I think there's a great opportunity now for women because years ago when you got married you were at home, and you had your family and that was it. Then, there were these women's groups and there were courses and classes for women and that's where I actually started (Rosemarie, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2022).

Aine acknowledges that the essence of home for the female has changed in Ireland:

I think Ireland...even though it would be associated with Catholicism and things that are conservative maybe even backwards and all of that. But I think it is a reasonably free country and I think probably in terms of being an older woman...the essence of home has changed for the female as well (Aine, Pre Bealtaine interview, 2017).

The idea of the essence of domestic home space having changed for women in Ireland is interesting and requires further research.

Tina purports that the next generation are more assertive, and she admires that. She states our female children are, and granddaughters will be, stronger women because of us:

Our generation thankfully are, I think, turning a corner because I look at my children and they are not as shy or insecure as I would have been as a young girl. My daughters are well able to stand up and stand their ground and I admire it in them ...and granddaughters...they are going to be stronger women because of us (Tina, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

At the Bealtaine festival in May 2017, I facilitated a poetry workshop with the women using visualisations to initiate a process of self-nurturing. Asking the women if you had to visualise yourself as an animal, what animal would that be? I shared that I visualise myself as a workhorse; 'a large draught work horse, ploughing through what's in front of me; and pulling the world behind me,' (Caroline, facilitating the Bealtaine event, May 2017). Reflecting on this image, I feel comfortable in its strength and giving. Bridie acknowledged that my visualisation of being as a workhorse resonated with her, reflecting however, that as a mother, grandmother, wife, or ex-wife; by still putting your family's needs above your

own and caring for everyone else; Bridie felt you were neglecting the nurture of self. She suggested:

I think I've become more aware that I am older because I haven't the stamina that I used to have and yet you are expected to carry, support and you do willingly because it's your role as a mother, a grandmother, a wife, or an ex-wife, whatever you still try to give your best and be the best to everyone. Not in a saintly way but in a way that means you negate your need to think about your own invisibility because you are doing, doing, doing. And as soon as I personally stop to think and usually it is when I want to write a poem or want to expand a thought into some written piece or prose or anything that captures meaning for me then all the other thoughts come flooding in (Bridie, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Tina speaks about the traditional role of women in which they were expected to 'keep house and home together,' (Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017); and the internal struggle between the maternal instinct and the conflict for self-actualisation. She articulates that it is now at this stage in her life, that she has an opportunity to be and do what she intrinsically wants to be and do, without feeling the internal conflict of Catholic guilt. She reflected:

I never minded being in that role, but sometimes I'd feel very frustrated as I knew there was something in there trying to escape. I didn't blame society or I didn't blame my situation for being married young and having children young but there was always a conflict going on inside in my chest or in your heart or in your spirit or in your form and I could feel it clawing and every now and then it would get to the surface and I'd say 'This is my chance' and something else would happen and I felt I was pulled back and now I am at the stage that I want to go left I can go left, if I want to go left I can go left, if I want to stand still I can stand still (Tina, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Findings from this study indicate that as women age there is an innate need to embody and express one's authentic self, outside of the confines of their constructed sociocultural identities. Maria explored this topic in her interview suggesting:

You do just go through the motions so that you are able to serve everybody else and you can very much be an accessory to everybody else's life you are not really living your own life [...] It's like with your mother hat on, everybody else comes first... I can remember somebody saying to me 'Well we were all happy until you decided to have a life!' [...] It's so important to look after ourselves (Maria, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Sadhbh concurs with Bridie and Maria's statement that having spent most of her life looking after everyone else and putting others before herself; it is third age ageing without those responsibilities brings a renewed sense of freedom. Sadhbh recounts 'I've spent most of my adult life looking after children and an ex-husband which thankfully I no longer have to do, 'expressing a freedom suggesting, 'And I now have grandchildren, so I do feel that enormous weight of responsibility I am finally free of,' (Sadhbh, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

In a neoliberal society there is almost an expectation on grandmothers to support the functioning of the nuclear family by providing child minding support; and so there is something interesting in Sadhbh's interpretation of having grandchildren, yet there being a sense of a weight off her shoulders; when for others grandmotherhood can be an extension of motherhood, where the caring role and responsibility is transferred to the grandchildren. In reflecting on Sadhbh's exploration of her role as grandmother, I wondered if she has subconsciously rebelled against the neoliberal societal expected role function; pushing back against the narrative of her role and duty as a grandmother to support child rearing.

Ageism and stereotyping around ageism are pervasive in Ireland. Ruth expressed her irritation at some well-meaning organisations who present older people as having no agency, arguing:

We do live in a society which is rather ageist. And I think that has to be challenged. And I get awfully annoyed sometimes with well-meaning organisations, sometimes they talk about older people in such a patronising manner... the impression is given that older people can't do anything and that they are living in fear, that they are either being exploited by greedy relatives, or they are in fear of burglars they can't do anything (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine, interview, 2017).

As a web designer in the tech sector, Janice recounts that age discrimination is pervasive in the workplace. She notes 'I can't get interviews, I don't put my age on my CV...but they can tell from the education and stuff, they can sort of quickly work out...and you don't get anywhere so I think there's a huge ageism in employment and I do feel that has an impact on me,' (Janice, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017). The area of older women and opportunities for employment needs further research.

According to Quinlan (2017) gender inequalities still exist in health, education, and employment for women in Ireland. Additionally, Cullen and Corcoran (2020) referred to the global consciousness awareness of gender power relations and deep structured gender divisions within our institutions, processes, and practices.

Janice noted that:

There's a huge amount that needs to be done...it was an Equality stand and there were 4 men standing around it and I walked across the road, and I thought 'No!' and I went back, and I said 'Oh, that's interesting equality, not many women here are there?' And the man said 'Oh no she's coming soon' as if 1 in 5 is equality. So no, there is such a lack of understanding I think, around equality and what equality is, and the role of women in society and the value that we bring (Janice, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Maria notes the pervasiveness of patriarchal expectation that women will take on the workload because that is what they have been doing for generations. She argues that these narratives and expectations reinforce the women's role as a subservient one that transmits across generations, it's expected because that is what our mothers did. She states that:

I've been watching...the way men are in organisations and...committees. I've been watching the men and the women. The men will go in and they feel that it is perfectly normal for them to delegate, they will have no problem asking people who aren't even on the committee and the women will be trying to do it all by themselves. Because that's what our mothers did, and the guys followed the lead of their fathers or the male role models and there was always someone to delegate because the women were always running around doing stuff. As women I don't feel as women, we feel that we have permission to delegate to others... (Maria, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Maria's comment that men feel it is perfectly normal to delegate; and as women we do not feel that we have permission to delegate to others is interesting. The role of gender as it relates to leadership and management has been well explored. With regards to roles in academia, Boland (2014) notes that gendering in academic circles in Ireland is well documented as the result of several high-profile discrimination based on gender cases.

To tackle gender inequality in the employment and academic arena, gender equality training through a feminist intersectional lens, needs to be promoted. Supporting the



introduction of leadership roles for women will help when the intergenerational transmission of gendered expectations needs to be challenged.

Women as carers is a role which has been normalised and embedded within Irish society. In contemporary Ireland, the Irish Constitution still codifies the mother's role being in the home. With reference to the normalisation of women being the carers in contemporary Irish society; Sadhbh suggested that the thinking is still prevalent that women 'are supposed to be looking after everybody else,' (Sadhbh, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017). Other women concurred and spoke about having spent their past time caring for others.

However, what became apparent as an overall theme is that the women had consciously benchmarked the third age as the time in their lives where they would prioritise themselves. An awareness of time passing was evident in their responses. For example, Ursula suggests that for her 'Age is catching up, that's why I'm trying to do a lot of things,' (Ursula Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017). Anne states 'I feel a lot more comfortable than I have done at any other stage in my life, I suppose I've come to terms with myself. This time is for me,' (Anne, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017). While there is a comfortability in oneself, a reimagining of the self also emerged from the women's narratives.

From the experience of the migrant older women, Bridie highlights the importance of self-empowerment to her as she gets older:

So, I think as an Irish woman who lives abroad, I know Manchester is only a step away, but I've connected more with the Irish community in the last 10 years than I have done all my life as a married woman because I was getting on with living, doing, and working... I have made the time and think it is important that you empower yourself to put some value on the things that matter. Because deep inside we know what matters...but as an older woman you have always stepped aside for other people so I'm kind of enjoying the fact that I am choosing to do things that I want to do now (Bridie, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

There was also a sense of freedom about being in the third age. Sadhbh celebrates that being this age gives her a new sense of freedom, in that she is not feeling pressured to look young:

When I think of my 50s (I am now 52) I just have this overwhelming sense of freedom [...] despite the fact I look in the mirror and I can see more

wrinkles, despite the fact that my granddaughter told me that I had wrinkles one day and I didn't realise this. Despite all that I still feel free. It's like I no longer have to try and look young, I just can't do that because I am a certain age, and I am embracing it (Sadhbh, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

While Sadhbh notes that for her this time denotes a sense of freedom, she also says 'despite' having wrinkles. There exists a kind of embodied sense of the neoliberal celebration of youth and beauty in Sadhbh's response, though both represented a juxtaposition that was to be observed in many participants' thinking as the study progressed.

#### 6.1.4 Vintage, Value and Worth

As Ylanne (2012) attests ageing and identity are inextricably linked. Interpreting one's ageing is underpinned by one's internalised experiential sociocultural, historical, political, psychological, and personal ecosystem of living and ecosystem/s of inheritance. Gullette's (2004) seminal theoretical perspective argues that, like gender and race, age is socially constructed by society, and we are aged by the culture we live in. Using the reflective journals to frame how we felt about our identity, we wrote about how society sees us as older women and how we feel individually as older women; our writings reflected Gullette's concept of being aged by culture.

There was also the juxtaposition in not consciously thinking of ourselves as older women, in the sense that it did not frame how we lived our lives.

In reflecting how I feel as an older woman I wrote:

I don't consciously think of myself as an older woman, what I mean by that is it doesn't frame what I want to do in life, and there's so much to do, there's so much to create and that's the important thing for me, that's what frames life for me. Now that's not to say that I don't know I am an older woman, I do know that I am an older woman (Caroline, Reflective Journal, Pre-Bealtaine, 2017).

As referred to earlier, the role of women as carers and nurturers is a role that has been normalised in Irish society. This was reinforced by the legislative obligations for married women within the home, i.e., treatment of women in the Irish Constitution Article 41.2, where:

[...] 'the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. [...] The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home

Some of the women in my study felt that society expected them to forfeit their own journey at the expense of caring for and supporting others. Instead of being leading actors in their own lives, they felt they were mere participants in the audience of their own lives.

In Ireland because of various expectations (religious, legislative, and societal) for women to remain in the home, women took up the role as carer in the home without dedicated financial support. However, these women who worked as carers in the home now find themselves without pension contributions. Further research needs to be conducted with older women, who because of taking up the role of carer in the home and benefitting the state, are now on an unequal footing with regards to pension contributions.

In relation to the exploitation of women in postcolonial Ireland by the Catholic Church (e.g., in the case of the women who worked in the Magdalene Laundries) and the Irish state in the case of where the state benefitted from women who took up the carer in the home role. I consider both these situations to be zeroprocity, emanating from a conceptualised potential sociological term which I called zeroprocity. (I first mentioned this term, coining it anecdotally, at the TrentAging 2019 conference in Peterborough, Canada). Defining zeroprocity as the practice by a person, group, organisation, state, or country who holds the power and agency; of exploiting another person, group, organisation, state, or country for one-sided benefit/s. I need to further develop the concept of zeroprocity.

In answer to the question *How do you feel as an ageing woman in Irish society?* Sadhbh responds 'Why can't I be left alone to do what I want?'. Ursula also questions the societal pressure to act your age? Why can't society just accept us for who we are? When Ursula is told that she does not act 60; she asks the question what should a 60-year-old woman act like? In her interview she revealed:

I am 60 and when I say that to people, they say sorry and I go, do I not look sixty? They go no, you don't act 60 either! I don't know what an acting 60-year-old is but age is not something I think about... it's the day you were born,

and I celebrate the day I was born ...but it's not really celebrating how many years old that I am (Ursula, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Ruth, acknowledging that '50 is now in the past for me, a few years in the past' (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017) reminds us that women can be powerful at every age and in both her lived experience as a child and now; she has never felt there was anything she could not do. She suggested:

Women in society now, older women, is not really something, personally, that I have ever thought about... I don't think that age should matter because women can be powerful at every age. We talk about being allowed to do things personally, I never felt that. I never felt that there was anything that I couldn't do (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Ruth's comments depart from the idea of older women without agency or empowerment. In reflecting on Ruth's perspective of one's worth and ageing, I remembered her earlier comments about her father telling her she could be anything she wanted to be. Ruth's sovereignty, expressed through her statement: 'I never felt there was anything that I couldn't do', is reflective of her personal agency and self-worth.

The women spoke about time throughout the year-long journey, e.g., this was the right time for me, time is getting on, this is my time not others, how I make use of my time, how I make my own time, ageing with time.

Ursula recounts that in life she was always in a hurry to do new things but now she takes and makes her own time:

So, it was always I couldn't wait. But now I'm not in so much of a hurry. I can take my time and I can enjoy...There's a lot of things I suppose as a younger person that I couldn't wait to do and now I would have no interest. I wouldn't be waiting for that now' (Ursula, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

The difference in how the women perceived themselves as older women as opposed to how they were perceived in society was indicated in the findings from the Pre-Bealtaine 2017 interviews in response to the question *How do you feel as an older woman in Irish society?* The women did not see themselves as old; nor did they feel old. The women expressed that they saw themselves as themselves; they did not immediately see

themselves as old - the consensus being represented well by Tina's statement: 'I don't feel old, I just feel me,' (Tina, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Aine acknowledged that she was getting older 'So, I am getting old, my body is old, it's been on this land or world for 56 years coming up 57, that's a lot of years,' (Aine Pre Bealtaine Interview 2017). At the same time, she also didn't consider herself as old 'First of all, I never considered myself old, I actually have to remind myself when I see what age my children are, when I see what age my friends are, when I see the age that older people are and that they are older, I go 'I am not so far behind them!' (Aine, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

According to May and Thrift (2001) how we experience time on an emotional level is conditional to the individual's identity and perception. Paula notes that ageing is not usually benchmarked but rather one age merges into the other. She reflects:

Well, I don't define myself as an older woman for a start... it is not the sort of thing I would get up and think about. I would say the 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s they all kind of merged into one, one into the other so that's not something I ever, ever think about (Paula, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

This concept of ageing merging into each other, overlapping like waves, is interesting.

Tina, in reflecting on her own ageing, remembers her mother at the same age as she is now, acknowledging how society viewed older women at that time. Tina also reflects on what our physical limitations are now compared to what we could physically do in the past. Also, in remembering her own mother's ageing, how difficult and scary, at times, this revelation may be. She recalled:

Sometimes it makes me realise too that I am an older woman. I used to spend hours in the garden, now I can't spend as long. It's just part of recognising what you are now and letting go of what you used to be. Sometimes that's difficult to let go of you used to be and at times that kind of scary. In recognising how society treated older women, Tina remembered saying to her own mother at sixty, 'Mam, you shouldn't be on a bicycle.' And here I am. I love my bicycle. (Tina, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

These women were not saying that they refused to acknowledge that they were ageing, as they innately knew that they were ageing; and indeed, said so; but they were not somatically translating the self through an ageing woman lens. This is paradoxical in the

knowing without knowing of being an ageing woman. Contextualising the dual feelings of old and young at the same time; Moglen, (2008, p. 297) identifies that transageing time can be experienced by which 'multiple self-states of past, present are available for recognition and enactment.'

Tina tells us that it was an external signifier which alerted her to being perceived as an older woman in society. When Tina saw a notice to join an Active Age club, she realised that she was now being defined by society as an older woman. Her age determined her qualification to apply:

I never realised that I was an older woman until I was looking at a notice board 'Active Age Club commencing in September all over 55's welcome to apply' and that's when I realised, Oh Lord, I am an older woman!...Tina later reflects... 'These are things that you have to kind of look and think or sometimes when you pass a mirror and you catch a glimpse of yourself and you say, 'Oh Lord, that's me now! 'Now it's not that it is a shock, it's a realisation. Inside in your heart, or in your mind, inside you are still 25 (Tina, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Reflecting, I realised that I have been meandering in the metaphysical landscape of how I feel as an older woman for several years. The thinking is there, 'just beneath the surface,' (Ériu Illuminat, 2017); but I had not immersed myself philosophically in that well yet.

Although, reflecting on it, running parallel to how I've been externalising and trying to interpret how I feel about my own identity as an older woman, I realise, that through the creation and externalisation of my art performances, such as the immersion in the bog; and the call to other women to immerse; flints of insight into the social construction of older women's identity in Irish society, surface like iridescent fish together moments (Caroline Reflective Journal, Pre -Bealtaine, May 2017).

While the decade of commemoration in Ireland seeks to address women's stories which have been written out, erased, or edited out of history; a residue of the historical erasure of women's achievements in the western world exists, known as the Matilda effect.

Rosser coined the phrase 'The Matilda effect' in 1993, as the systematic suppression of women's work in science, and the attribution of women's work in science to male colleagues; naming it for Matilda Joselyn Gage, who had first described the effect in her 1870's essay.

Ruth identifies the Matilda Effect in relation to her role model Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell who discovered pulsars. Burnell was omitted as one of the Nobel prize recipients for her work. Ruth acknowledges the Burnell, in her seventies acts as a role model for older women in a society where the trope of the older women is not projected to be admired:

One of my personal heroines and she is now in her 70s is Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell, astronomer who discovered pulsars back in 1967 which she should have got the Nobel prize but didn't, she got every other prize worth having...all in a society where older women were perhaps not accepted and admired but she is a role model for all those women out there who have made and continue to make Ireland a better place to live in and I think that also applies to every other society on earth (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Lack of older women as role models in all areas of society perpetuates the dominant narrative of older women being of less value and unproductive to society; and at the same time, reinforcing the gender dichotomy of young and old. O'Neill and Schrage-Früh (2018, p. 2) also explores the impact that consumerism plays in widening the gap between young and old. They suggest, 'Despite prevailing postfeminist rhetoric, in contemporary neoliberal society the potential for empowerment through consumerism only serves to heighten gender dichotomies of young and old.

Erica, in her Pre-Bealtaine interview, internalises third age ageing as a time of reflection. Serving as a counternarrative to a woman's value being closely tied to her youth, Erica reflects:

I find that I have turned into a person who is a lot calmer, and I do feel a lot wiser, and I feel a lot more comfortable about myself than I ever have done at any stage in my life... I have come to terms with my faults and also the good points about myself, which is something that can be hard to accept (Erica, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

We learn from Hughes (2002, p. 142) that 'time is understood and experienced differently by women'. Findings from the year-long exploration through the liminal Timespace of Uisneach evidence that the women felt that they related more to cyclical time, making comparisons to the cycles in life and nature. This is in keeping with feminist researchers who argue that cyclical time which includes 'processes, movements, vibrations, returns,

and rotations,' (Vojcic, 2014, p. 88) reflects women's lives more deeply than linear time (Hughes, 2002, p. 142).

Chris references that life is made up of recurring cycles:

Life is cyclical, I also believe that you can be very young because you can be at the beginning of one of these new cycles in your old age and become very childlike with the joy of living whereas people who are not tuned to that just become chronologically aged and they don't pick up on these nuances, these beginnings of cycles within their own lives (Chris, Pre-Winter Solstice Interview, 2017).

Here Chris comprehends life as iterative cycles which hold possibilities of simultaneously being young and old (Moglen, 2006) disrupting the normativity of neoliberal linear time. Similarly, Paula notes that the third age has a unique quality of its own, in being a more reflective stage:

Well, every age has its reflections and its inward and outward energy and so in the 50s inward outward energy is different... Rather than define me as an older woman, I would give it a different kind of quality...definitely more contemplation and less manic... the priority is to relax and to be at peace (Paula, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Ruth expressed concern at how older women are not valued in and by society. She pushes back against this narrative, highlighting the work of some older female role models in her community, suggesting:

I absolutely regard as role models women I know in their 70s, 80s and in one case their 90s who are still out there, they are running community groups, they are learning new skills. One lady I know, she learned how to use a computer in her 80s and now she is better at it than most people of her grandchildren's generation (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Sharon spoke about the importance of passing on intergenerational knowledge, specifically for women, regarding various stages of life and hopes that someone will benefit from her one day.

She suggests: 'I worked as a carer before my gym instructor job. I love the elderly; I love working with the elderly. You can learn a lot from the elderly. Hopefully, someone will learn from me one day' (Sharon, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017). Echoing the idea of passing on intergenerational knowledge, Ursula also highlights the wealth of knowledge that is



collected across a lifespan, the richness of one's lived experiences and how they dealt with challenges in their lives:

Older people have been on many journeys and have met many obstacles and have achieved many things as well. I love meeting people, especially older people because they always have a story to tell (Ursula, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Key findings indicate that although all the women did not perceive themselves as old, they were all aware of being older. Some of the women were consciously aware of, and had tuned into, the multidimensional cyclical seasons of life. As explored in ecofeminist theory (d'Eaubonne, 1974), they were aging with a premeditated mindset of cyclical ageing, echoing the connections between the cyclical systems of women and nature.

#### 6.1.5 Menopause, Prioritising our Health as our Work

During the period of my own menopause my life's work changed course; and utilising art-based mediums, I followed my interest in exploring my own ageing. Performing art and poetry to explore my own ageing led me to the women and ageing/ageing studies/cultural gerontological disciplines. Engaging with ageing research networks and presenting at ageing studies conferences opened new ways to look at women's ageing.

Traditionally in Ireland, menopause has been shrouded in secrecy, it is something that is just not talked about. According to Brady Nevin and Creedon, (2007), despite extensive research on menopause, its symptoms, and psychosocial aspects; little is known about the personal meaning or view on the menopause transition as experienced by Irish women.

As Segeant and Rizq (2017) identifies, menopause is a highly significant event in a women's story. Reflecting on my experience of menopause, when blood tests confirmed that I was in the perimenopausal stage; I did not feel as if I was as well prepared as I should have been. I had read up on menopause symptoms, understanding that I needed to listen to my body, to be conscious of the physical and hormonal changes as a result in the decrease in oestrogen and I experienced hot flashes as 70% of women in menopause experience (Sergeant and Rizq, 2017). Other than the independent research I did, there was little or no space to share experiences of menopause with other women. Experiencing the nuanced

unspokenness about the menopause in Irish society; and I fell into my usual modus operandi of just getting on with it; draught horse mode.

At the same time, my creative energy increased. Exploring this in my Reflective Journal: I wrote 'My energy was diverted into another stream, my energy levels increased but in a creative way...It was a time that I had to speak to myself. It was an awakening, time is passing by and there is so much I want to do,' (Caroline Reflective Journal, June 2017).

As explored above, rituals are an integral part of the Catholic religion. The influence of rituality is embedded in our sociocultural fabric. Reflecting on menopause as a rite of passage, seemed to me, an opportunity for ritual. In my journal I wrote: 'It wasn't satisfying enough for me having my blood test done to be told you are pre and coming back to say you are in the menopause... I think there should be a celebration, a ritual, there should be a gathering of women to celebrate,' (Caroline Reflective Journal, June 2017).

Over thirty years ago, Greer (1991) in her book *The Change*, lamented the lack of societal ritual for menopause. She attests that the climacteric (menopause) is a time which should be consciously acknowledged by women; a time of 'spiritual as well as physical change' (1991, p.3). Greer believes that the missing cultural acknowledgement of menopause as a rite of passage contributes to the lack of recognition for the celebratory impact of the menopause. Greer believes that individually, to mark 'the irrevocability of the change,' women are devising their own private ways of ritual (1991, p. 3). Menopause is still a taboo subject for discussion in the western world. Its lack of discourse is identified by Sergeant and Ritz (2017) as 'the unspoken social rule that keeps menopause hidden' (p.189).

Reflecting that in cultural terms, a lack of recognition for the celebratory impact of the menopause still exists, I believe that the participative and communal element of rituals can act as a celebratory marker in society. I wrote:

I'm interested in the rite of passage for women in menopause and that there's no explicit rite of passage...It's not spoken about or celebrated...There is a little bit about it in medical terms...It's just not talked about or conversed about... I don't see the menopause being mentioned in celebration, maybe in a medical manner, but not being celebrated in mainstream media

(Caroline Reflective Journal, June 2017).

In embracing menopause as a time where I could prioritise doing the things I enjoyed; for me menopause became an invitation to step into a creative process of reconnecting with self. I found myself in the last few years, going back to all the things that I enjoyed in my earlier life, as a child, teenager, and young adult: art, singing, drama, dance.

The women saw the menopause stage as the time to be considering the reprioritising of personal health. As referred to in the literature review, whilst acknowledging the cataclysmic sociological and legislative changes that have taken place in Ireland over the last few decades, the historical intertwining of Church and state in the subjugation of women has left a residue of secrecy which in contemporary Ireland is still impacting the provision of healthcare services for women (e.g., Savita Halapannaver; Natasha Perie; and Vicky Phelan). The women considered ageing in terms of their health, and how it may impact their lives.

Aine says:

In terms of being an older woman, I would say I am older today than I was yesterday otherwise I wouldn't worry too much about it. I would only really consider my age in terms of my health. That would be the only thing that would sort of remind me of my age. And thankfully I am healthy so therefore it's all good (Aine, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Menopause remains a taboo subject in Ireland (Brady, Nevin, and Creedon (2007). This dearth of information on menopause, its symptoms and treatments constitute a huge injustice to women (O'Riordan, 2021; Thompson, 2021). Lack of discourse in the media around menopause also adds to the stigmatisation of ageing women. Bridie, who trained as a psychiatric nurse; reflects critically on the changes that may come along with menopause; noting that in this stage of life, you may redefine your identity several times in relation to personal changes in your life and body:

You have to realise that physically your body changes as an older woman. You go through a major physical and mental change in terms of the menopause. And that can go on for so long that you redefine yourself a few times in the course of that and things about your life change. Might be that work finishes or carries on, but marriages can finish, and you still have to finish and you still have to carry on. But there's lots of good things, grandchildren come along, work opportunities broaden (Bridie, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Other acknowledgements of a physical decline with aging were noted by Sadhbh who suggested: 'Now, I know I am getting older, I know my body is decaying and I am not as quick as I used to be, that old menopause thing whatever that's about, you know?' (Sadhbh, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017). These declines were further attested to by Patsy in relation to her work as an artist making large sculpture:

Well, age I mean physically the bones are getting sore and you know, I have arthritis and that's not very helpful to making large sculptures and so there's a frustration in that, in that I tend to work very big and that's very physical. Bending metal and working with cement and I finding I'm less and less able and I guess I'm getting to the point I want to be making more bigger things because I know I can in theory but physically it is taking longer so that's a bit frustrating (Patsy, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Janice and Sharon reiterated the importance of maintaining flexibility in your body as you age highlighting the benefits of going to the gym for older women:

Older people really should go to the gym. I advocate it. I tell everyone I talk to... I don't sell it on fitness, I sell it on flexibility. Because to me that's what I get out of that gym. When I first went, I lost weight, but I haven't lost weight for a good while now really, I'm toning up. But I gave up smoking last year and I never put on a single ounce because I was going to the gym...More it's about the flexibility in your body. It keeps you walking straight; it keeps your movement in your arms and in your hips and all of that especially women because you are doing stuff that is like weight bearing for your bones and that. As you get older it is what you need (Janice, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Sharon concurs with Janice, reflecting on the balance between staying physically and mentally strong as an older woman:

I think adult fitness is very important as you are getting older, to look after yourself for the grandkids. So, I need to be fit and healthy for them...It's important to stay physically strong, it is easier than staying mentally strong. I think you are always fighting with yourself to stay mentally strong (Sharon, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Discussing their experiences of menopause also brought forth a reverence and respect for the female body. Erica describes her experience of menopause as having to adjust to a shift, reflecting on the idea that some women experience severe symptoms and others do not:

Yeah, it's a real shift... When the time comes to unleash that energy, it is a real dark energy... Some people sail through menopause and don't have the

symptoms...And now, the aches and pains and having to change my diet... maybe I should be looking at things like bone density and stretching... drinking plenty of water. But I was thinking my lifestyle has always been going through change, like pregnancies, what food to avoid, what food to eat. Even around menstruation, the effect chocolate and coffee had on me, so I was quite in tune with my body, so now I am over the worst of the symptoms I have seemed to have settled back into myself and I'm very similar to the person I was before I started the menopause which is quite a relief because I didn't know the person I was turning into (Erica, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Menopause can be experienced very differently. Erica who tells us that she experienced severe symptoms during menopause and did not recognise the person she was becoming. The invisibility of older women in the media perpetuates an invisibility of information around issues which can affect women, such as the individuality of each woman's menopause experience. Greer (2019) argues that older women's invisibility is precisely the reason that there is not a societal understanding that every climacteric is different; that not all menopausal women are experiencing the same symptoms. As a result of the women's discussions around menopause in my study and having a space to discuss their experiences of menopause in the unspokenness in society; one of the participants Erica who is a radio producer with Athlone Community radio; went on to produce a 13-part radio documentary on women's experiences of menopause. (I will discuss this further on).

Reflecting on my own experience of menopause thirty years after Greer wrote that a woman going through menopause simply had to 'tough it out,' (1991, p. 39); I questioned if I am doing the same thing, toughing it out. I thought, is this what I am doing? Why was I so tough on myself? Tough on my body, tough on my mind? Why have I given myself instruction to just get on with it? Why do I feel this way about my body, viewing it as a machine which must not break down at all costs? I had to stop and tell myself that the body is a living, sentient, feeling, somatic, corporeal, adaptable organism. Reflecting on why I think I should just get on with the menopause I think about different factors; how we were indoctrinated by the Catholic Church as children; to put oneself first would be the sin of pride; the internalised shame of menstruation; the blood, the blood, the red blood; the legacy of the policing of women's bodies; the lack of discourse about menopause in the media; the concept of to be woman is to suffer; and the hesitancy to go to a medical professional about the menopause. If I had galvanised a stoic position towards menopause,

finding it difficult to advocate on behalf of my own body, then other women may do so too. It took this journey to realise that I should be more compassionate towards myself and my body.

In the western world, the lack of rituals for puberty, giving birth, and entering menopause translates as a missed opportunity for matriarchal knowledge to be passed on and the intergenerational chains of shame about menopause of women to be processed. In Celtic times, rituals marked a specific time in a person's life and had significance within the community. Bhreathnach (2014) refers to several important rituals in the medieval age in Ireland, among them the passage of birth, initiation, puberty, death, rebirth, and burial. Sharing the journey as a *Communitas of Sisterhood* through creative ventures and creative collaborations in this study; we accessed an awareness or consciousness of the divine feminine, combined masculine and feminine energy of empathy, intuition, and the power of nature.

Rituals are commonplace in the Catholic religion in contemporary Ireland. Christenings, communions, weddings and funerals, rituals and symbols play a significant part in our culture; but there are no rites of passage recorded to give significance to the third stage. Reflecting, I wondered: 'If our ancestors had a ritual to mark the menopause stage or a croning ritual? I'd like to imagine they had,' (Caroline Reflective Journal, October 2017). Moreover, thinking about the invisibility of older women in Irish society, I wondered if it is because there is no dedicated safe space and place to reflect on our ageing or to participate in a ritual to initiate. In my diary I wrote: 'Is it because there are no rituals for entering the third stage, no ritual for menopause, no ritual for becoming a crone? Was there ever, or have those rituals been lost throughout the centuries?' (Caroline, Reflective Journal, post-Samhain 2017).

Celebrating a rite of passage for menopause has the potential to infiltrate and disrupt the social construction of what it means to be an older woman in Irish society. By participating in ritual, menopause, and ageing as a rite of passage can be reclaimed. I decided that in the future I would facilitate an intergenerational ritual at Uisneach to celebrate menopause, inviting mothers, daughters, and grandmothers to celebrate this stage in a woman's life as a rite of passage and an act of activism toward a more egalitarian society for older women.

As outlined in the literature review chapter of this thesis and as mentioned above, feminist researchers have criticised the successful ageing paradigm (Katz, 2013; Rubenstein and de Medeiros Marshall, 2017). However, neoliberal society dictates that the ideal female body is youthful with reproductive qualities and this thinking is evident in Erica's interrogation of her use as a postmenopausal woman and the perceived impact on her identity. Grappling with her identity as a postmenopausal woman, Erica asks:

How could I be of use at all as a postmenopausal woman, what role was there for me? Was I going to lose the whole sensual part of my nature? Was it drawing a line under that aspect of myself which has been a huge part of myself? Of my identity? (Erica, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Continuing the hegemonic discourse of ageing women as one of decline, or as having less value in society, has the propensity for that trope to be internalised by older women, and all women, raising questions about their value in society. For the women and I, participating in my study reinforced the importance of listening to one's body. We agreed that we must make this a priority that in embracing our third age, we must listen to our body. I resolved to incorporate this into my new life philosophy.

### 6.1.6 Third Age as a Reflective Stage

This study provided the space away from the Irish societal gaze; away from the patriarchal gaze; a space to 'free yourself up a little bit from what people think,' as Aine suggested (Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017). It offered a space for us to think, negotiate and restore our identity as older women living our authentic selves with agency and as part of our society. Erica acknowledges that the journey would not be easy, it would be painful and emotional, yet she recognises the potential for cleansing and empowering:

The wonderful thing what you Caroline have put together is giving a specific group of women a chance to look at themselves which is something, whether due to conditioning, or being really busy or daily demands, or caring for others, or the fact we are left to one side by society, how we have got out of the habit of looking at ourselves, we are too busy thinking of other people... We look at what we do rather than what we are or who we are. And it's very, very special because I think that's a common theme is where do we get the luxury of the time to actually to focus in on ourselves, of who we are and it is painful and it is emotional and yet there's something

cleansing about it, there's something quite empowering about it (Erica, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Reflecting on the study in my Journal, I wrote: 'It's more than the sum of its parts because it's a collection of women who have a relationship with each other through poetry, art and through the community and so this actually is more than the original sum and together there is a synergy there that has yet to be,' (Caroline, Pre-Bealtaine reflective diary, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017).

Most of the women spoke about embracing the third age as both a reflective and planning forward stage. Maria states:

50 is a great age because, well, we have another 50 years to actually really powerfully, perfectly do something...I love being the age I am. I wouldn't like to be going back anywhere, I have been through some very difficult times, I wouldn't undo them for the world, I think you learn more from your hard times than anything else (Maria, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Erica states that she had always embraced the idea of becoming older, highlighting that 'we are older for so much longer!' She argued:

I always wanted to be older. When I was younger, I always wanted to be older and I feel now I am as old as I want to be, I feel grown up. But I feel I have arrived if you know what I mean, I don't have to worry about getting old anymore, I have begun the process (Erica, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

The concept of Erica 'having arrived' concurs with observations on identities (Goffman, 1959, Hall, 1993, Giddens, 1993 and Cruikshank, 2003). Rosemarie also embraces her ageing - taking time to enjoy it as life is too precious, saying 'I just love what I do. I take one moment at a time and enjoy it because I think that life is too short and too precious,' (Rosemarie, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017). Echoing the idea of the preciousness and specialness of this time, Tina sees the third age as being a special age for her. She noted in her interview that she 'never felt as special at any other stage in my life as I do now as an older woman,' (Tina, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Patsy contemplates that a lifetime of lived experiences enables us to more empathetic, to be able to take other's perspectives into consideration:



I mean everyone when they are in their teenage years, they think they know everything especially if you are very opinionated as I would have been... But I suppose that as I have grown older that I have realised that there are other ways of looking at things too (Patsy, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Aine highlights the 'luxury of being an older woman,' as learning from lived experiences and being 'reasonably comfortable in your own skin,' (Aine, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

She suggests:

Gaining confidence in yourself [...] there are a lot of advantages. I think number one, you hopefully know yourself reasonably well at this age. I think number two you know what you stand for and what is important to you (Aine, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

As a result of the initial invitation and question of our ageing and identity, the women began to reflect on how they felt about their identity. Findings indicated that this initial reflection prompted their return to creative pursuits. Sadhbh reflected on the last time she took up the guitar, back when she was sixteen:

But I feel like, gosh, there is just so much to life out there and like you Caroline, I played my guitar, the last time I played my guitar I was about sixteen. I'm drawing, writing, and trying to do all of that and earning, doing a full-time job. And I get there's a very strong sense that I haven't got much left, you know at 52! If I live to be a 100, I'm just over halfway through my life and the first bit just flown by so...yeah (Sadhbh, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Aine notes that in nourishing her passion for music, she is nourishing herself; and so is better equipped to look after whoever needs to be looked after in her life:

And in terms of myself, of quality to do with music or to do with humour or to do with conversation or to do with passion for life or whatever. All those good things! And that would influence me and then that sort of preserves me and it's not to sound selfish about the thing but if I look after me, I can also better look after for example my child, or my home or look out for my friends or whatever (Aine, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Later in the study, as the *Communitas of Sisterhood* evolved; it became evident how powerful women's friendship can be. The friendships developed because of the *Communitas of Sisterhood* developed within this Geogendered Landscape and Timespace

continue far beyond this study; timewise and in geographical terms, to national and international collaborative working relationships in art, poetry, and radio documentaries.

As Sharon reflected: 'We were all comfortable with all the sisters to tell them your deepest feelings. You trust your sisters to pour your heart out to them, I think it is phenomenal,' (Sharon, Post-Bealtaine, 2018, final interview).

Findings indicated that friendship with other women was one of the most valued in the women's lives:

One of the things that I have discovered as we get older is that women are amazing. I'm not taking from men, but women are amazing. I don't think most women know how amazing they are. Like I have a such a really good cohort of friends and they are all so different, so different from me, so different from each other and yet we have such amazing qualities of compassion and empathy, if you are a good woman and that is what I would aspire to be a good woman as best as I can be as an older woman in Ireland. I want to be, like when I look at women who are friends, I am going 'I want to be like them and better and every day be a little bit better than I was the day before, one day at a time (Anne, Pre Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Another theme which developed was that the *Communitas of Sisterhood* acted as a holding space for the women who could not be there. We, as the participants, held the space for others who could not be there. We held the space for Bridie and Sharon who were in their own ways negotiating the complexities of ageing as migrant older women. Bridie, a migrant of over 40 years, speaks of her hearted-home as Ireland and her made-home as England and reflects on living away from hearted-home in her made-home:

I think that when you make the choice to emigrate you do it as a young woman and the decades slip by and the people that I have looked after and nursed that were more aged than I was started as a young nurse, I thought 'Goodness me they have spent all their lives away from home, will they ever go back?' Now I find myself living as a 57-year-old living from being 21, I have lived longer in England than Ireland and so for me now, I am now the older woman... maybe getting the chance of dipping in and out of coming back but really, I know in my heart of hearts that I have got children and grandchildren in England. I have got siblings here so... it's almost a dichotomy of emotions. My hearted home is Athlone, my made home is Manchester. And I love both of them so maybe in being older, yes, I have more choice, I have more freedom yet there are other things that drive my actions (Bridie, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Bridie explores this dichotomy of emotions with regards to her identity, her hearted-home and her made-home in her poem 'Crossing Over:'

### **Crossing Over**

Dublin, Manchester  
Manchester, Dublin  
I lose track of who I am  
Momentarily I lose track of me.  
(Breen, p. 108 in Harte, 2017)

In embracing the multiplicity of potential in between identities and liminal spaces to be inhabited by the Irish diaspora, McLeod (2000) highlights the 'in-between position of the migrant [...] and the [...] new, dynamic thinking about identity which go beyond [...] national identity' (p.16). Sharon speaks about the complexities of living away from one's roots, reflecting that 'you miss your roots (not living in Ireland). Roots are always strong in Ireland, always good connections, family, and friends to help you. Yes, it's tough sometimes [...] Always back to the phone call in Ireland when in need,' (Sharon, Pre- Bealtaine interview, 2017). In the context of my study Sharon's rootedness in Ireland and her longing for the interconnectedness and the physical support of ageing in place warrants further future investigation.

The role of gender in developing identity is important. Janice argues that it is the women you surround yourself with, who impact on who you are. She suggested, 'It is the women you have around you that impacts hugely on who you are,' (Janice, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017). Janice recognises that wherever you live, having an open and progressive attitude broadens the mind:

If you have always had people around you that are open, progressive and then you are open and progressive because you attract each other. But if you are the sort of person that, and this is said with no disrespect whatsoever, but you are the sort of person that just goes to church every Sunday and never travels and only just lives in your small town then you bring a different...When I go home, I lived in a smallish town in England. And I see friends there that have never travelled. So, it's the same for them and it is exactly the same here and it's around broadening. If your mind isn't open you don't broaden it (Janice, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

In comparing ageing in one societal context to another, Janice, who was brought up in the UK, compared her lived experiences of the impact of living and aging in Ireland. An interesting finding was that Janice felt that the women in Ireland presented as older because of the way they were brought up. She suggested this presentation of being older in oneself was as a direct result of the cultural, religious, legislative historiography of women in Ireland. She suggested:

I always sort of feel over here that women of my age are older than I am because of the way that I was brought up... the way that in England society wasn't so constrained by the shackles of the church. Women had more equality so I suppose it was quite a shock coming over here, even down to things like I couldn't get a job when I first came here because I was a single parent. And they would ask you questions because you still could then talk about your kids and everything (Janice Pre Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Gray's (2003) work on gendered approaches to migrancy diaspora studies to reframe, rethink and reinvent 'identifications beyond the space/time of a nation' (p.2) and focused on women in the 1980's. Since Gray's work, there is little evidence of migrant Irish women's lived experiences in the emerging academic scholarship on diaspora, transnationalism, and Irish emigration. Further research investigating older migrant women's perceptions of ageing in place; the multiplicity of potential in between identity position/s of the migrant; and the liminal spaces inhabited by the Irish diaspora older women; is a key recommendation emerging from my study.

#### 6.1.7 Reconnecting with Celtic Spirituality impacts Imagination and Creativity

Through our participation in the rituals of the Celtic festivals honouring the Goddess Ériu, the sovereign Goddess of Ireland; the women and I took on the mythological mantle embodying Ériu's third wave feminist qualities of social egalitarianism. Travelling backwards and forwards in time; we weaved a *Communitas* of Sisterhood against the backdrop of our mothers and grandmother's patriarchal past; negotiating and renegotiating our identity as ageing women against our patriarchal present; to re-enter Irish society in our authentic identity as older women of agency.

In the literature review, I explored the concept of TimeSpace and throughout this thesis I developed the concept of Geogendered space as being a geographical, mythological, and

spiritual space whose historiography imbues feminist concepts of equality. Many of the women identified the connection they felt to the landscape and how this could evoke a sense of wonderment, imagination, creativity, and connection with the greater world.

Ursula tells us how she relates to the flora and fauna of the landscape:

I love nature, I love looking around me, I love going up the hill and wondering what's going to be there [...] I feel very connected to the beauty of the land [...] you are going along and the mountains there's heather on one side and the sun is shining on another, it can be raining. That's the connection that I have to the land (Ursula, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

These sentiments were shared by Aine who acknowledged the beauty and landscape of Uisneach:

When we are in Uisneach you are just surrounded by land, hills, things growing, just ordinary things growing, just nature happening around you so it's showing what season it is, its showing different plants living, growing beside each other whatever, it's showing the lake being higher or lower or whatever (Aine, Post-Lughnasadh feedback, 2017)

We also see for Tina that there is also a more unseen and private element to her relationship with nature. She reminisces about her childhood and how her imaginary capacity could sense that her secrets were always safe with the trees

When I was younger as a child, I often told stories to trees...but sometimes you have to tell something a story, even as a child you have to tell somebody something that you know it's a secret. You don't want to share it with anybody, but you can tell a tree and a tree is not going to tell anyone (Tina, Post-Lughnasadh feedback, 2017).

Reflecting on the sociocultural and religious context in which we experienced childhood in, I wonder if Tina had tuned into the nuances of oppression for women at a subconscious level during her childhood. Had she assimilated the message of 'little girls should be seen and not heard'?

Again, the imaginative and creative capacity of nature is reflected in Aine's comments:

It's often nature that feeds into creativity and I noticed myself, that I hadn't been outside for a while and I went for a walk, and I just sort of looked upwards into trees and I thought 'Oh Jeez, how gorgeous that is!' Just that that little moment sort of settled me, it eased me somehow and

even if we are living in built up towns or whatever it is just that little moment that will catch you but (Aine, Post-Lughnasa Feedback, 2017]

Nature/Earth based, or Celtic spirituality offers a way of living which resonates and connects with the women's life philosophy, it centers around nature, it focuses on kindness, it recognises the Goddess, the divine Feminine. We learned through Patsy that she had taken a stance against organised religion to explore her spiritual identity. Along her life journey, Patsy lived in a horse drawn wagon and travelled close to nature:

So, I decided to leave the North, left my family, left my home, and actually went to stay with some friends from Wexford originally. We actually planned to travel around Europe, but we stayed with friends who were living in a horse drawn wagon and we thought maybe we will do that. And so, we actually did that for about 9 years. And I suppose in many ways living, taking a stance against organised religion, it led me to explore a kind of spirituality. In some ways travelling as we did so close to nature, living on the land as we did, your main priority is your horses, we were always looking for grazing, you are very connected with the energy of the land, so I was drawn more and more explore that connection and it's been a long, interesting journey with many hiccups along the way (Patsy, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Patsy's own words tell us that her opportunity to travel and journey is not only physical but spiritual in nature; leading her to question and renew her belief system identifying practices more harmonious with nature. Now a visual artist Patsy's work references the visual language of the earth and mythology.

Reflecting on her ageing in relation to her future work as a visual artist, Patsy notes:

And I suppose there is that awareness that as we age that time gets shorter...who knows how long we have? I am 50 this year now, who knows maybe I have another 10 or maybe I have another 50, who knows? But I suppose with my creative productivity I'm becoming more and more aware of the limited time that I will be able to keep creating as I am. Especially physically I have become less able; it's like 'Don't want to run out of time while there's all these different things I still want to make!' (Patsy, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Throughout the study, the women and I spoke of not wanting to run out of time as there were still so many things we wanted to create. For Patsy, the other women and I, there is a sense that this time in our life cycle was conducive to the flourishing of our own creativity,

through various mediums such as art, music, dance, and writing. There was a desire being communicated of the need to make room in one's life for this flourishing of creativity. This theme became an important finding as the journey progressed, as evidenced by the outpouring of various production of artefacts through creative mediums evidenced in this study.

Sadhbh reflected on the energy, balance, and space we needed to conserve in our lives for ourselves to make room for our creativity, and to continue in our creativity:

I think I am coming to a certain stage where I realise that I don't have as much energy as I used to, and I am constantly wrecked, tired. But I am living my life as if I was 10 years younger and I need to cop on to that because I have no room for creativity. I go to work 5 days a week, I am floored after that, I am trying to fit in a few social engagements which I absolutely need for the sake of my sanity and go for the odd walk and then all I'm fit for is to sit in front of Netflix (Sadhbh, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Paula too acknowledges that instead of focusing on intense physical work like she has done in the past; at this stage she wants to focus all her energy on her art, working creatively:

Even the whole thing from being a woman over 50. I had never thought about age or if I have it's been very fleeting maybe something like I don't know if I have enough energy...For instance I actually phoned up somebody this morning to dig up the garden beds because I haven't done anything but a few years ago I would absolutely do it myself...I need to spend my energy doing my own things, like art (Paula, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Concurring with Paula about diverting our energy into our creative work, I wrote:

I feel that I have gone back to my earlier life, as a child, a teenager, and as a young adult; to the time where I was most creative and productive as an artist. I must have, somewhere along the line, subconsciously decided that I want to spend this time creating things, creating things that I want to create; creating socially engaged community art. I want all my energy to be redirected into creation; so, while I still love the bog and love being in, and walking on the bog, I see the bog as a place to inspire whatever art I decide to make, painting, poetry, or performance (Caroline Reflective Journal, Pre-Bealtaine 2017).

Findings indicated that we, as older women, want to focus completely on creative work. Instinctively, we know that being creative and being connected to the land are important to our overall health. This supports the need for a wider societal discussion on policy

implications supporting the well-being of ageing women. Communal arts-based practices through ritual within a Geogendered landscape have much to offer from this perspective.

#### 6.1.8 The Difficulty with Identity: Can you tell me who I am?

In the literature review, identity is defined as complex and individual, constructed of multidimensional layers of individual beliefs, cultural values, of our lived experiences and our relational experiences. As Faulkner (2015) asserts our personal identity 'interacts with relational processes to shape relational identity,' (p.209).

In Ireland, older women are clumped together collectively in Irish society as faceless, invisible and on the margins. My study provided a journey through ritual where we could share our individual lived experiences in a space and time and in a *Communitas* of Sisterhood where the uniqueness of our individuality was understood.

Defining our identity proved difficult. We had to explore our individual identity as opposed to our family, work, and societal roles. Through the initial data gathering stage of the pre-journey interviews, the women felt that they were not living their true selves, that they were playing a role (performing) in society. The third age was seen as the ideal age to explore identity.

Anne describes how she identified herself in terms of the many distinct roles she played. Her distress is palpable as she relays how difficult it was to define her own identity:

A friend of mine was training to be a life coach and so she wanted to practice on me, so she called me in and said, 'Tell me about yourself Anne?' and I did all the things that I worked at, where I lived, how many children I had. She said 'No, it's not what I asked you, I said tell me about yourself,' and I started crying. I didn't know who I was, I actually didn't know who I was because we all take on these mantles and so I teach, I am a mother, I was a wife. (Anne, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Anne's struggle to define her identity is a theme which resonates with the other women. Not having the opportunity to know the true self until now was a pre-journey thread in this study. Some of the women, like Ursula, found it so difficult to construct what their identity is that they resorted to asking others in their life to describe who they are. 'So, I don't know if I looked in a mirror, what would I see? Maybe a crack in the mirror! I don't know,' (Ursula, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).



To concrete her identity, Ursula uses objects such as a Russian doll, a Kinder Surprise™, an onion, to invoke her outside/inside identity; to illustrate the complexity of the many layers to her identity. She suggested:

Sometimes I don't even know my own strengths, so I have to ask people...one guy described me as a Russian Doll, you meet me, but you don't know me, you take off one doll another doll ...and all these dolls are different sides of me ...Somebody else was describing me as a Kinder Surprise. She said you see this girl coming in ordinary hair, ordinary dressed but when you get to know her, she is quirky, funny and very intelligent but you never know what to expect...a social butterfly, I can understand that too...An onion...There are many layers to me and again I never seen myself as this, I just seen myself juggling...and Caroline was talking earlier there about being a plough horse... I would see myself as a juggler...I asked my G.P...how she would describe me and she said 'Well, you are remarkable, I don't know how you keep going, you are actually quite ill...' I said, 'But sure I'm not sick?' And she laughed and said, 'Sure you are not sick!' So, with all the ailments I am not sick, and I got the upper hand with that one, (Ursula, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

Ursula reflected on how she had to adapt her identity as a cancer patient and what she learned from the experience. 'I may go back and say I learned quite a lot; it changed my life, I learned quite a lot from being sick, anyone who has had a major illness will tell you that,' (Ursula, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017). Sharing her coping strategies, she used to adapt to her new identity, she tells us:

A lot of things I would do I would do for charity...it was a calendar... I was very ill, and I was waiting to go for cancer treatment, and I have a stoma...and it was very difficult to get dressed and find clothes to wear because it was quite big...My sister Kathleen and I were sitting with the newspaper in front of us... Now we weren't fully nude... and I was in St Luke's Hospital...and we were in front of the newspaper, and they were looking at me and looking across the newspaper and I was saying 'Yeah it is me,'[...] Now I go to a meeting once every 3 months and tell people about what it's like with a stoma. I remember one woman said, 'I really don't know; however, I am going to go out again, I can't even dress. 'I put my hand up and said if all else fails do a calendar (Ursula, Pre Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Describing the process of adapting to her new identity as an older woman with a disability; Ursula tells us how she used writing and journaling as forms of empowerment:

I went to a course one time about empowering yourself... I wasn't long out of hospital...And the tutor said 'Now Ursula we are all going to write down how you see yourself, how you project yourself, how you interact with the

community...if you don't have a lot to write down we will understand you have just been through a very tough journey, 'I said 'I'm just going to tell you something, when they are all sitting there with their pencils in their mouths and tapping their fingers on their lips trying to figure out what they are going to write next I will still be writing, 'and that's exactly what happened because with the illness I had empowered myself again, (Ursula, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Ursula's quote tells us about how her life experiences have shaped her identity, her adaptability to illness, her coping mechanisms, and the strategies which she felt helped her shape her new identity, as an older woman with a disability. As an older woman with a disability grappling with her shifting identity; who in terms of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) would be classified as doubly disadvantaged in society; Ursula had previously challenged the societal norm of older women as frail, weak, and invisible by appearing in the (almost) naked calendar for charity.

Nevertheless, while Ursula evidenced her coping mechanisms to adapt to her new identity as an older woman with a disability; she tells us of her difficulty defining her identity, stating that she was still unaware of her identity.

Ursula's story is important to my study. By making herself visible, a counternarrative to the hegemonic narrative of older women was created.

A new narrative of older women's identity needs to be storied. It is recommended that policymakers restory older women's identity through a third wave feminist intersectional lens as valued members of society - heard, visible, having agency; and seen as valuable members and contributors to society.

Sadhbh shares that it is at this stage in her life that she can begin to understand herself, her roots, her strengths. She described in her interview:

I just feel like I'm just beginning to understand myself. I know what I want, who I am, and where I come from. I have roots, all of my adult life I have been going around in a fog, what is this all about? What am I doing here? And perhaps it's because my time is taken up with looking after other people whereas now, I am forced into a situation where I am on my own, so I have time to reflect and think about these things. I think it's a great, great time and I'm enjoying it...I am a woman of all sorts, all sizes, capabilities and sometimes I don't even know my own strengths, so I have to ask people, (Sadhbh, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Sadhbh' s insight into this stage as being the time to really know her authentic self, resonates with the other women who define the third age as a time to delve into truly knowing oneself suggesting that most of our previous life was spent caring for others.

Sadhbh explained that participating in the study brought her out from her parent's shadow, giving her the space to reflect on her own identity:

It's bringing me out from under the umbrella and it has taken me a long time. You know, the umbrella of my parents, my father is very good at art, and I think I always thought I wasn't good enough. I knew I had something, and I knew I loved to do all of the above but always felt not quite good enough. This whole journey coincides with a point in my life, and I am at that point now that suddenly I am finding my own voice, and no longer am I worried about what somebody is going to say or how it will be judged. It's a long time coming, (Sadhbh, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Living in a patriarchal structural system as 'other' can filter to the subconscious, translating into feelings of not ever feeling good enough. Tina concurs that she became used to being silenced or invisible and can identify with being 'institutionalised to the identity of this self-fulfilling destiny of not being good enough'. Tina had never actually thought about how she would identify herself and wondered how others identify her:

All my life I probably was identified either as Martin's daughter or Brown Owl or the girl who played basketball...I'm going to be sixty in October, I'm identified as Granny and I like how I am identified at this stage in my life. I absolutely adore being someone special to my grandchildren...though I do look back with regret in life that I didn't have the opportunities. I would have loved to have gone to art college when I was 18, but in those days, it was, do a secretarial course and get a job, so that's how women were identified when I was doing my Leaving Cert. So, I had to do a secretarial course and then of course I got married young and my children arrived, so I became the mother so that's when I became identified all those years you know as Mammy, mother, the housekeeper, the house minder...Sometimes I wonder when people look at me from the outside; I wonder how they identify me? That often crossed my mind because I know I am getting older. But I wonder if people already look at me as being older? (Tina, Pre-Bealtaine Interview, 2017).

The women and I shared that this study provided space and time in a liminal world outside the patriarchal system in which we negotiated their authentic self-identity.

Some of the women used objects to represent their identity. Rosemarie plays on the use of the griddle as an object she used to represent her identity, by upending the use of the griddle not to cook, but to heat the wax she uses as an artist. She recounts that being an artist is a part of her identity discovered late in life:

We were asked to bring an object that would identify yourselves...But the object I bought was my griddle which I use for my wax which I paint now in, and I just love it. I don't know why it is, there is just a connection with it. It's not that I ever cooked with a griddle, don't think! Or I'm not a great cook but it was only when I bought it that might be the identity of getting married, looking after family, cooking but here I am turning around once my family are grown up now, I can use this to do something else with that I enjoy, (Rosemarie, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Using the object for an alternative use, not for its household use for cooking, acted as a rebellion for Rosemarie:

It was like a rebellion; I'm not doing what I should be doing with this. And then...the ironing like we did earlier with the iron and then it was only then that it kind of hit me...the iron is kind of preparing clothes and woman's job to look after and do that and here I was I was using it to create, so it was good... sometimes you don't even think of what you are doing really so it was kind of relates to moving on...I would have had my family when I was young then which I have no regrets because I feel that it is my time, I am still young enough to do what I want to do and there is loads that I would like to do, there is always something I want to do, (Rosemarie Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

The concept of rebellion in Rosemary's quote is valuable, as it connects and illuminates my research question of our identity as older women - we were rebelling against society's perception of what we, as older women were supposed to be.

Thinking of the generations of women who went before us, our mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers and the lives they had to live; some of the women spoke about their mothers who had to give up their jobs upon marriage:

I don't think it was correct, I think it was patriarchy, a Catholic thing, I think in times past a woman's needs were allegedly met, virtually through her husband and through her children... But I do believe a lot of it was through that it kind of shrinks a person a nice bit doesn't it really? (Aine, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

The abolishment of the marriage ban in 1977 reopened opportunities for women to establish a professional identity through employment. Maria reflects on this theme of working women and the division of labour in her household:

My mum always worked and she double jobbed, she worked as a pharmacist in her career and then she would come home and do all the housework and the rest... she was still running with 2 hats on so we then learned to be extremely capable...My mother just has amazing energy, you know, she is almost 80 and she is unbelievable...So you know, if that's your role model they are kind of big shoes to try and fit into! And then you kind of realise sometimes that not the life I want to live...and what I have realised is that we are human beings not human doings, and I would spend a lot of time what I call reflecting and getting my head straight' (Maria, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Ruth tells us how her father's feminist values continue to influence her:

I was also fortunate enough to have a father who was a feminist, my mother died when I was 11 and she herself had been a bit of a pioneer because she was a pharmacist when not many women were doing pharmacy. My father certainly believed that women were as good as men, as equal as men and that there was nothing that I couldn't do so I never had a sense that there was nothing that I couldn't do (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Aine concurs saying she has 'a fair amount of ability and scope to actually do what I want to do and express what I want to express,' (Aine, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

The residue of embedded gendered and patriarchal discrimination in Ireland still exists.

Ruth comments on the missed opportunities of higher education for some women:

In that sense I was lucky, I knew one lady who worked in a shop...A very hard-working woman, a great personality but she should have gone to university, she certainly had the brains to do so but her father wouldn't let her for as far as he was concerned universities weren't places for girls. That was not 100 years ago, that was in mid twenty first century Ireland. But that attitude existed, hopefully things are changing. I think women should be celebrated at all ages whether you are 20 or 100' (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Janice tells us of her distinct perspective growing up in a culture which was not 'shackled to the Church.' She reflects:

I'm actually English...but I have been living in Irish society... since 89...I find it quite interesting, my position or the way women of my age in Ireland are very different to women of my age in England...I am at the time 61 so...I always sort of feel over here that woman of my age are older than I am, because of the way that I was brought up...in England society wasn't so constrained by the shackles of the church. Women had more equality so I suppose it was

quite a shock coming over here, even down to things like I couldn't get a job when I first came here because I was a single parent. And they would ask you questions because you still could talk about your kids and everything. And that changed and that brought me into work as an activist in the community sector, (Janice, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Some of the women have walked away from the Catholic Church. Ruth walked away finding it an offensive institution because of its attitude towards women:

I never had the sense of the Catholic Church as an oppressive force in my life. I was lucky enough to be educated by nuns who were actually quite liberal and the first woman I ever heard actually use the term feminist was actually a nun, which was quite interesting... And I would know a lot of women in this county have found the Catholic Church an oppressive institution and there is no doubt that it was. And I still find it quite an offensive institution because of its attitude towards women but I really don't care about it. I walked away from the Catholic Church decades ago and have never walked back to them since. And I go to a church where my bishop is a woman and I am used to seeing women priests (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Others have retained their faith. Sharon sees her faith as part of her identity, suggesting:

I came to London when I was young, and I sort of carry the strong religion from when I was a child and one day I hope to return to my roots. I go home every year...I never lost my Irish roots, never. I still interact with a lot of Irish involved in my work. I'm a fitness instructor, elderly Irish members come in to talk, all different age groups...Completely different role (being a grandmother) we have to guide them. Bring them up with our background, Irish roots as best we can, (Sharon, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

In terms of religion and faith, Sharon tells us that she has not lost her faith; she carried her religion with her when she left Ireland and that practicing the rituals of Catholicism helps support her as a migrant, living away from home. In terms of the older migrant women and their identity, Sharon informs us that being an Irish Catholic is a strong part of her identity as an older woman living within the UK.

Identity like ageing is layered with complexities. Ireland's unique historiography encompasses multiple physical, sociocultural, political, religious, and psychological borders and boundaries in considering one's identity. Patsy reminisces about living in the 80s in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and her experience of being in a punk band to step outside political and religious borders:

Toxic Waste was our band, and it was very, very political... all kind of taking a stand against the politics that we were being faced with. And it was quite interesting because in the punk movement in the 80's in Belfast, it was one of the few movements where people didn't know if you were Catholic or Protestant. We stepped outside of those boundaries. And we would all go to gigs together, we would dance, and we had such a sense of unity outside of normal society but that of course then left us open to retaliation from both sides actually (Patsy, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Patsy's lived experiences of stepping outside religious and political boundaries is significant. She attributes her qualities of self-reliant and being vocal to her experiences of being in a punk band and having a strong political voice:

Being in a punk band and having such a strong political voice...My partner passed away when my children were very young actually, so I bought up my kids alone which was not easy either...I have 4 children, so it was not easy just to provide for them at all, it was always a struggle. But I suppose I'm very self-reliant because of that...I don't like to ask for help because I like to do everything myself. In some ways speaking out has never been a problem for me personally (Patsy, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

For some of the women, their identity had been shaped by the history of women in Ireland, as second-class citizens in a patriarchal society, shackled by the Church and state. The policing of women's bodies by the Church and state emerged in the women's answers. Ruth explored the issue in her interview:

I grew up in the 70s and 80s which was the time the feminist movement was beginning to take off. One of the issues I remember very much was the big referendum in the 80s on abortion and on Divorce.... And what I do remember about that is the misogyny, the misogyny and the sectarianism and the sheer fanaticism of the anti-abortion side'... and I do remember a friend of mine...saying she was sick of turning on a radio and listening to men talking about women's bodies. That was my feeling as well'...the issue of women's rights to control their own bodies is still something which we really have to deal with in this country ...the fact that women have to leave Ireland to get an abortion angers me a lot. And although I have said that I don't really care about the Catholic Church in some ways that institution does annoy me, but it doesn't annoy me as much as some friends of mine who are Catholics and feminists and really angered by the way their church treats them (Ruth, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

In the past, being prevented from accessing family planning, contraception, and abortion services, women's bodily autonomy was eroded, shackling them to the domain of the home. Aine suggested in her interview:

My mother had 5 children relatively close...She would have been an independent sort of woman when she got married, she had to give up her job...She was in a very Catholic country and it wasn't whether or not you wanted to have kids, you got married, you had kids was where it was kind of at. (Aine, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Patsy recounts how her experiences of living in a war zone in Northern Ireland made her question religion:

Personally, as a child of Belfast, growing up in the 70's you know, growing up within that war zone environment and realising that there may be different ways to look at life than I was being presented with and the whole sectarian model didn't work for me, you know I thought people are people we are all the same human beings. And I couldn't live with the divisions that were up there. That made me very much question religion generally. And saw that perhaps as a model for people's moral behaviour that there might be other ways forward. And so, a lot of my youth was exploring different ways to be within society and different spiritual paths (Patsy, Pre-Bealtaine interview, 2017).

Contemporary Ireland as an island has a border that serves as a visible reminder of the divide between North and South, both with distinct cultural identities. Borders and boundaries are words assimilated into the vernacular, into our common day use of language and the language of borders are entrenched in our psyche.

In my study, Triskelic Journeying through Geogendered landscape in contemporary Ireland was used to renegotiate identity. With regards to the current discourse centering around a whole island identity; policy makers and community activists could leverage the Triskelic Journeying model to explore a re-examining and reclaiming of an all-island Identity.

## 6.2 Participating in Ritual in Geogendered Landscape

As women of the third age, the overall feeling was that this time in our lives was the exact time, the kairotic time, to explore and negotiate how we feel about our identity as older women. Syncing organically with cyclical time, (a concept of time influenced by the repeated patterns and cycles in the natural world), by participating in this study we disrupted the social construct of patriarchal linear time. It was within this context that the opportunity to journey to the self; the *Communitas* of Sisterhood developed; and an opportunity to renegotiate our identity as older women was born.



Findings indicated that our participation in the rituals provided an opportunity for transformation, concurring with Turner (1969) who theorised that rituals also served as social dramas in which the community had the opportunity to renew itself.

We participated in the rituals of the Festivals of the Seasons at Bealtaine, Lughnasadh, Samhain, the Winter Solstice, Imbolc completing the circle back to Bealtaine again. Bealtaine, celebrated on May 1st, is a Celtic Festival marking the beginning of Summer. In Irish mythology, Ériu the Sovereign Goddess of Ireland, is honoured at the Festival of the Fires on the Hill of Uisneach, the mythological and sacred centre of Ireland. An ancient tradition acknowledges once the fire is lit at Uisneach, only then can all the other fires around Ireland be lit. Bealtaine and Samhain both mark a liminal time in the Celtic calendar, a time when the veil is thin, and it is easier for one to slip into the Otherworld.

Lughnasadh, celebrated on 1st August, marks the beginning of the harvest season. Samhain celebrated between 31st October and the 1st of November marks the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter and is celebrated by the lighting of bonfires over Ireland. At this liminal time, the veil is thin between this world and the next, and the boundary to the Otherworld can be more easily crossed. The Winter Solstice on December 21st marks the shortest day of the year. Imbolc, on the 1st of February, celebrates the pagan Goddess of Fire Brigid, associated with fertility, healing and poetry and marks the beginning of Spring.

After the first Bealtaine Festival the women began to initiate their own rituals of dance, chants and singing; and so, rituals within rituals arose, creating the use of artworks, paintings, painted stones, photographs, mementos, plants, gift giving, music, songs, and chants. Through the participatory performance of the rituals, the doing of the rituals, the walking body in the landscape, the moving body, the dancing, singing, chanting, making music, the making art body, and the immersing in the lake body; we did the work to birth our authentic self-identity.

Through the work of the rituals, a creative energy manifested itself and was unleashed. Each of the women harnessed this creative energy to produce something that they could share or gift to the others in the group.

Patsy's sculpture of Ériu featured as a focal point in the events. As a visual artist Patsy continues to create, in direct contradiction to her felt sense of the ageing process impacting on her ability to do so. As an older woman and artist, she carries the creative life force within her. Her birthing process is not done yet, her mind and life force fertile with creative energy as she births creativity through her artwork.

Reflecting on the putting on of the mythological mantle, the embodiment of the Goddess Ériu and the feminist quality of equality she represents, as being key to accessing the Otherworld to unlocking our individual and communal renegotiation of identity as older women. I thought of the 8000-year-old Catalhoyuk's figurine discovered in Turkey. This simple figurine depicts an elderly woman 'with her hair tied in a bun, plump, with sagging breasts and a pronounced belly'. I considered the irony that a society considered primitive by today's neo-liberal standards, could develop such a symbolic representation of womanhood, honouring the beauty of the ageing female form and communicating ancestral feminist values of equality.

As reviewed in the literature, Twigg (2004) postulates that in the western world women's bodies have been especially categorised as problematic. Woodward (2006, p. 162) identified the 'absence of the ageing female's body in artistic and academic circles, 'suggesting that in societal terms 'we make reference to the [female] body as a category of cultural criticism [and] that the body is a youthful healthy body,' (2006, p. 162).

Reflecting on the paradox of how the female form has been historically viewed, ascribed, and honoured, and in contemporary society, shamed and criticised; I thought of the Catalhoyuk Goddess figure. As I reflected in my Journal: 'Here we are in the 21st century searching for a way to be seen and have agency in our own society; when 8000 years ago the civilisation of the Catalhoyuk Goddess figure had it all figured out,' (Caroline, Reflective Journal, September 2017).

### 6.2.1 Stepping off the Edge into the Unknown: Bealtaine 2017

At Bealtaine May 2017, thirteen women, including myself, stepped off the edge into the unknown. My poem Ériu Illuminat (which had been commissioned for the inaugural Herstory Light Festival on the Hill of Uisneach, Nollaig na Mban, January 2017 (Herstory,

2017)); called on the Goddess Ériu from the Otherworld, to release her spirit and open her arms to 'the Women of Ireland' (see figure 6 below).



*Figure 6: Photo Kilian Kennedy (2017) Reading my poem Ériu Illuminat for the Herstory inaugural illuminations Nollaig na Mban, January 2017 (Herstory, 2017)*

This poem acted as the invitation to the women participants to join me in 'Stepping off the Edge' to honour Ériu through the Festival of the Seasons rituals:

### **ÉRIU ILLUMINAT**

Ériu, Ériu, Earth Goddess,  
She is never far away,  
She lies just beneath the surface.  
In this blue cold bright of hanging Moon  
At Aill na Mireann, she rests,  
'Umbilicus Hiberniae',  
Omphalos  
Mother of Míde  
Ériu, Ériu,  
We call you from the Otherworld  
Open your arms to the Women of Ireland  
We are coming home,  
Release your spirit to the Grandmothers, Mothers, Sisters, and Daughters.  
Beneath this tomb,  
Flood your womb with ley lines of light,  
Let us dance and sing and honour the Goddess Within  
On this Bealtaine night  
Ériu, Ériu,  
She is never far away; she lies just beneath the surface.  
She is Here  
(ÉRIU ILLUMINAT, written for Nollaig na Mban, Jan 2017).



*Figure 7: Photo Nicole McKenna, (2017), Áine playing 'Ériu' Composition: Bealtaine at Uisneach*

Welcoming the women, I read the *Éiru* Illuminat poem and invited the women to read aloud their own poems or reflections, deliberately not assigning a running order, leaving it to flow as naturally as possible; those who wished to read aloud could do so, and there was no obligation. As a researcher, I was conscious that one of the participants, Sharon, had never read her poetry aloud in front of others and had expressed her shyness. I had also observed by her body language at the time that she was reticent, therefore not having an entirely structured agenda on the day, enabled everyone to participate at their own level of comfort. Erica read her poem *Space*:

### **Space**

I want to draw a circle  
And step into a different space  
A space that's warm and welcoming  
A space that I can leave behind  
A space that resurrects me  
Somewhere the time unwinds  
To be dancing through the shadows  
Catching blades of light  
Facing down my demons  
With laughter and delight  
Shaking fists at angels  
Running through the dawn

Barefoot on the hillside  
My chance to be reborn

-Erica Follows Smith, 2017

Themes of longing for a different space and time are evident in Erica's poem, 'Space.' She wants to 'step into a different space, 'she expresses that the space is 'A space that's warm and welcoming, 'and she acknowledges that this space is also a journey, her journey. She writes it is 'A space that I can leave behind, 'and hopes that it will be 'A space that resurrects me', a resurrection space, where she can face 'down her demons.' Again, the concept of time as a theme is evident in this poem. Erica acknowledges the fluidity of time, presenting us with an unravelling of the concept of time; linear versus cyclical in the line 'Somewhere the time unwinds. 'Erica alludes to what she has imagined as the potential transformative powers of this journey she is taking; envisaging the journey as a space (journeyspace) that will give her 'a chance to be reborn.' Sdhbh read her poem Emerging from a Torpor:

### **Emerging from a Torpor**

OLD - Ancient, antiquated, antique, decayed, done, elderly, obsolete, old fashioned, original, out of date, primitive, pristine, senile, worn out...

Words to describe me? I don't feel them. I don't know them.

FEMALE – sex which bears offspring

No more... I belong to this world. I am in it.

Voice clear and strong. Deep desires are now expressed...at long last.

CATHOLIC – charitable, generous, liberal, tolerant, un-bigoted, universal, unsectarian, whole, worldwide

Mother I watched you toil and fight a catholic life against an army of prejudice and anger jack-booting their way through your dreams and aspirations.

I went out into that same world to fight those dark furies.

The veil of vicious control pinned upon me is lifting, the chains of castigation are off, emerging from a torpor tall and true, to display my rounded decaying body and face to them all.

I am awesome, excited, and calm, liberal and liberated, desirous and desired, unique, wonderful, and winsome, powerful, and true.

- Sdhbh Brereton, 2017

In her poem 'Emerging from a Torpor', Sdhbh explores her identity by looking for 'words to describe me'. With reference to the life her mother experienced Sdhbh recalls watching her mother 'toil and fight against a catholic life against an army of prejudice and anger, jack booting their ways through your dreams and aspirations. 'Acknowledging that the 'veil of

vicious control is lifting,' (which may reference the demise of the Catholic church in Ireland) (Mullholland, 2019), Sadhbh tells us that 'the chains of castigation are off, 'that she is emerging from the constraints of that world in which she watched her mother battle through and that Sadhbh has fought 'those dark furies 'to reveal who she is.



*Figure 8: Photo Nicole McKenna (2017) Awakening the Goddess Within: Bealtaine at Uisneach*

Two of the participants who are artists, Rosemarie, and Tina, who could not attend the first gathering; submitted pieces of art encased poems (poemart) specifically made in response to the question of their identity in lieu of their presence. This concept of 'Hold me in the stones' (Tina, Samhain, 2017) emerged during the journey. The concept of leaving artwork, or poems, or painted stones, or small oak trees, or painted stones in lieu is interesting and needs more exploration in the future. In Rosemarie's poem 'The Journey 'she asks the existential question 'Where I am going? Where am I supposed to be?' (See figures 10 and 11).

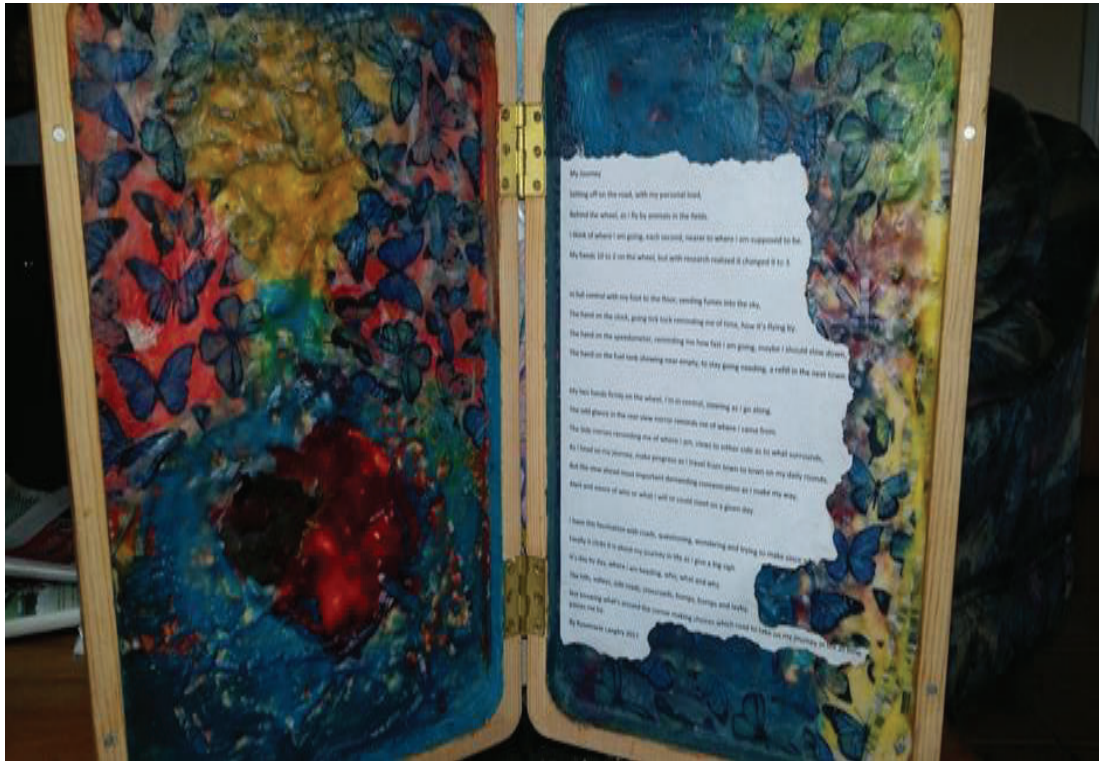


Figure 9: Rosemarie Langtry (2017) 'The Journey' Poem encased in encaustic and mixed media. (Photo Caroline Coyle)

Time features prominently as a theme in Rosemarie's poemart - she is aware of the sense of time passing, writing: 'The hands on the clock, going tick tock, reminding me of time, how it is going by.' Rosemarie reflects: 'Do I need to slow down?' In the poem Rosemarie lets us know that she has a fascination with roads, travelling, journeying, questioning, wondering, and trying to sense why? Using the roads as metaphor of choices she has made and will make along life's path she reinforces this concept of the road taken and the road not taken, with the immediacy of time passing in the last line: 'Not knowing, trying to make choices on the road, which road to take in my journey in life as time passes me by.'

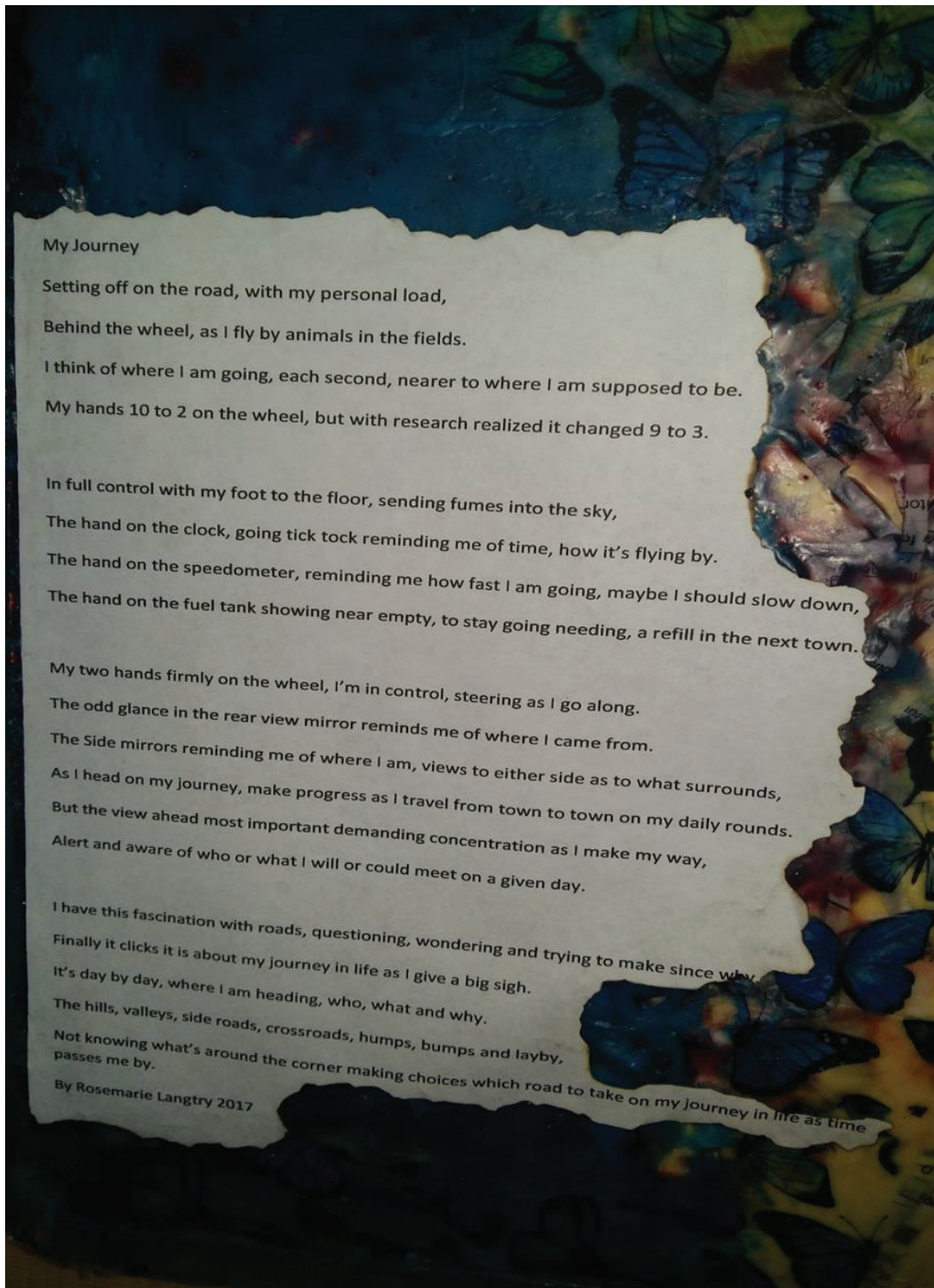


Figure 10: Rosemarie Langtry (2017) 'The Journey' Poem encased in encaustic and mixed media. (Photo Caroline Coyle)

In her 'Map of Life' 'poemart' (see figure 11) Tina uses a train journey along the map of Ireland to physically trace her journey through life. The train stops are milestones along the life journey; fertilisation to girl child; girl child to woman; and who she is now as woman



appears in the shape of Ériu as Mother Earth in the centre of the map of Ireland, at the geographical point of the hill of Uisneach. Symbolising how our life is interrupted and how we adapt to those interruptions; Tina tells us, 'Things, Life happens.... we stop'. Tina acknowledges that she, and we as participants in the study, are stepping off the edge into a different realm; she reassures us/herself, that this journey/space will give us a chance to get off the train, 'to 'rest, think plan 'and 'get back on,'. Tina also makes references to change and time noting that as we 'move forward', 'Things change, we get older'.



Figure 11: Tina Elliffe (2017) 'Map of Life', Acrylic Pour and Mixed Media (Photo: Caroline Coyle)

### Map of Life

Life is like a train journey  
 We get on at the first station  
 We move forward  
 Things, Life happen.....we stop  
 Sometimes we get off to rest, think, plan

We get back on, move forward  
Things change, we get older.  
Tina Elliffe, 2017

Again, the hold me in the poem concept arose when, to bring the gathering on the site of the Royal Palace to a close; Ruth Illingworth read a poem written by Bridie Breen, one of our older women migrant participants. Bridie was born in Athlone, Co Westmeath and has been living in Manchester for nearly forty years. The poem is titled Uisneach Alive Inside:

**Uisneach Alive Inside**

Seize the day  
Answer the call  
Uisneach is alive inside  
Re-awakening begins. Unfurled earthed tendrils, entwined with soul, spirit and child.  
Open portals to heart released energy flow infuses life force. The wild within enlivens nature's mantle.  
All unlive d dreams in embers soar  
Hill fire burns Stoked by presence in ashed night  
Seize the day  
Answer the call.  
Softer furrowed ground lands the spade Echoes of harvests failure of famine upsurge from soil.  
Clear voices transcend time and space Mounds and cairns plea for remembrance.  
Fertile gifts abound Holy high priestesses emerge bare footed  
Eriu's sovereign embrace.  
Goddess of water,  
Brid of fire.  
Attuned by stars  
Lit by moonlight  
Adorned by Sun  
Enthused by mystery  
Powered by belief  
We stand together

Seize the day

Answer the call.

Bridie Breen, 2017

As a representative of the Irish diaspora, Bridie told us that even though she is not present with us at this moment, through our journeying, she will embark on her own journey to

find her own self-awareness, she tells us 'Uisneach is alive inside 'and that even in providing a space that is virtual and liminal, it can instigate self-reflection. She tells us that 'Reawakening begins'... 'entwined with soul, spirit and child', finds 'Open portals to heart, released energy flow, infuses life force'. She refers to nature, to historical events such as 'failure of famine 'and to references from mythology. Her reference to 'Goddess of water, Brid of fire', is a direct connection to her own namesake. She affirms that 'clear voices transcend time and space', and that she will 'Answer the call'. The main theme in the women's poems written for the first gathering at Bealtaine evoked the embarkation of a long-awaited journey.

After the poetry readings, we walked back down to the visitor's centre where we shared lunch (each person brought foods and fruits of the season). Then in the outside amphitheatre, I facilitated a workshop in the co-construction of communal poetry. Thinking about the place, history, mythology, poetry, themes, words, time, ritual, and the space that we were in, we settled on the name of the poem as 'Awakening the Goddess Within' and I shared my two lines as the first two lines of the poem. When everyone was ready, I collected their lines and together we moved the lines around to create a communal poem. Then we then read aloud, in order, each of us reading the lines that we had written:

### **Awakening the Goddess Within**

She is never far away  
She lies just beneath the surface.  
She is here  
Bathed in gold with her soul wide open  
She shares her wisdom with the universe  
She is the breeze, a gentle presence  
But also, the warrior with shield and sword  
Her eyes cleansed, a strong desire  
To find new truth, new realities  
We follow her guidance  
We follow her path  
As we look for our Goddess within  
From the core,  
She draws her breath  
Taking control of the fight or flight  
Gold dusted hair  
Translucent skin  
Calmness, so beautiful

But it the mystical eyes  
All seeing, all knowing, that mesmerised the worshippers before her,  
Now go find your rhythm  
Play to your hearts tune  
Sing with a smile of self-knowing  
As I get older and get a little slower  
May you bestow your magical power and strength  
Woman within, I hear you I see you; I sense you  
Your glow is glorious and grand  
Hair grey Heart gold  
Lips red Soul old  
Here we gather, as one united  
Awakened Goddesses All

Caroline, Janice, Erica, Sadhbh, Paula, Sharon, Anne, Aine, Amy, Ursula, Maria, Ruth, Nicole  
(Communal Poem; Bealtaine at Uisneach, 2017)

The collaborative poetry making initiated the weaving together of the Communitas of Sisterhood fabric which became more tightly interwoven at each of collaborative poetry workshops at the gatherings. The poems written for Bealtaine 2017, some of which were the women's first ever poems, reveal themes of noticing how time was passing; and how significant it is that this is the right time is for us to explore our identity as older women.



*Figure 12: Photo Ursula Ledwith (2017) Caroline and Sharon stepping off the edge at Bealtaine 2017*

The poems revealed the women's feelings of wanting to step off the edge; 'wanting to go to another space, 'wanting to go on this journey. It was as if they had an innate knowledge or indeed hope that the journey would allow them to throw off the chains, the control, to resurrect them, enable them to emerge from the constraints of the world, giving them 'a chance to be reborn,' (Coyle, 2018, p. 37).



*Figure 13: Photo Caroline Coyle (2017) Bealtaine The Sun God Lugh*



*Figure 14: Photo Caroline Coyle (2017) Bealtaine Fire*

### 6.2.2 Immersion at Lughnasadh: August 2017

At the Lughnasadh Festival, we walked up the hill of Uisneach to Lough Lugh for the Communal Immersion. I had sent an email with a timeline of the day of what was going to happen. By inviting the women to immerse themselves physically in Lough Lugh, metaphorically this symbolic communal immersion would also act as a ritual stripping away the societal construction of older women in Irish society. The submersion at Lughnasadh was the physical enactment of what was, up until that point, a metaphorical journey. While up till then, we could understand an abstract way of being, by immersing ourselves, our whole being embodied the ritual of transformation and healing.

When we arrived at the lake, Ruth gave a talk providing the historical and mythological background to the Festival of Lughnasadh. Ruth, who is also a historical guide at Uisneach, introduced the history, mythology, and sociocultural context of each of the festivals. In this respect as she was a participant, she was also the historical guide, and her passion and knowledge with the mythology and landscape was evident to all. Before we immersed in Lough Lugh in communal Immersion; we had already immersed ourselves in the historical, mythological, sociocultural, and archaeological knowledge of each of the festivals, and of the different sites at Uisneach; e.g. The Royal Palace at Bealtaine; Lough Lugh at Lughnasadh; Ail na Mireann at Samhain.

Opening the ritual with an exploration of time, nonlinear and chronological, referencing the liminality of time and place at Uisneach; I reflected on how 'Time can be liminal, time may not be chronological, and this journey is a passage that we may, access the Otherworld,' (Caroline, Lughnasadh, 2017). We then walked into Lough Lugh Lake as far as we could go. Then holding each other's hands, we repeated a chant Bridie and I had written for the Immersion 'Immerse Yourself, embrace Éiru, honour the Goddess at Lough Lugh. 'The chanting got louder and louder as we swayed in the water until it reached a crescendo.



*Figure 15: Photo Nicole McKenna (2017) Lughnasadh Drying off after our Communal Immersion into the lake at Lough Lugh*

Having understood the transformative power of immersion from my experience of ‘The Bog Queen immersion;’ I was looking forward to sharing this experience with the women. Sharing the communal immersion with the *Communitas of Sisterhood* was a powerful communal experience; one in which, together, we gave witness to each other’s transformation.

According to the owners of the land at Uisneach (it is also a working farm) who see themselves as custodians of the land; our immersion in Lough Lugh was the first time anyone held an immersion ritual (see figure 9). In the research stage, I could not locate evidence of rituals that had taken place at Lough Lugh; however, I imagined that in Celtic times, it was a site of ritual and other women and men had immersed there in communal immersion.





*Figure 16: Photo Nicole McKenna (2017) Lughnasadh Tina jumps up on a rock, a scream from a primeval place*

After the Immersion, when we got out of the lake, Tina jumped up on a rock and screamed from the bottom of her soul, a scream that came from a primal place (see figure 10). I took Tina's scream as a sign that transformation had begun; that the immersion had been an opportunity for transformation in providing access to the Otherworld, to that primeval part of oneself; the part we do not always know is there. 'She is there, she is just beneath the surface'. From this point onwards, we as participants developed into a *Communitas* of Sisterhood.

We then gathered to read our poems. In response to the question, 'How do I feel about my identity as an older woman in Ireland?' Our poems, mine, the women's poems, and the communal poems we crafted together enabled us to delve deeper, individually, and collectively, 'just beneath the surface', to begin an exploration of our identity.

I read my poem 'Homage to the Bog Queen':

### **Paying Homage to the Bog Queen**

Slink down the boggy layers, Bog Queen  
A million tree times over  
Immerse yourself  
Between the folded sheet memories of oaken secrets  
Let the fettle dewdrops lick your legs  
Shoots of pea grass warm your toes  
Encase your feet in black peat brogues  
Your breasts bogcottoned  
Your hair minnowlike  
Crowned with umbilical water weeds.  
Bathe yourself in Moons and Moss  
Murked humus of pain, drought, famine, and sacrificial fruit  
Wet peat roots shoots  
Banked up frogged canals  
Your belly swollen with humic and tannic  
Hymning acidic secrets of a million stars  
Pay homage to the Bog Queen  
Listen for the soul poems  
She whispers from the peloid seepage of life.

Caroline Coyle, 2016

In the poem while I asked the Bog Queen to 'Slink down the boggy layers [...], A million tree times over [...] Immerse yourself [...] Between the folded sheet memories of oaken secrets,'. By asking the bog Queen to immerse herself through the ages, landscape, and secrets, I was inviting the women to immerse and to pay homage to her: 'Listen for the soul poems [...] She whispers from the peloid seepage of life.' In this act I was asking her (ourselves, our Communitas of Sisters, the Bog Queen, Éiru as the embodiment of the divine feminine) to immerse, in an 'attempt to reclaim' her (our) space in society.

I conceptualised the immersion with the women as a symbolic communal ritual to 'reconceptualise the body in the Irish context,' (Barros-del Río and Terrazas Gallego, 2022, p. 1) as a body of agency. In my Reflective Journal I wrote: 'By claiming back the body, we claim back our identity,' (Caroline Reflective Journal, July 2017).



*Figure 17: Photo Nicole McKenna (2017) Lughnasadh Aine, Caroline and Bridie sing Homage to the Bog Queen poem*

The communal immersion acted as the transformation ritual. By immersing ourselves; we went beyond to the Otherworld; underneath the layers of bog, water; the layers of intergenerational patriarchy; layers of intergenerational shame; we never forgot the Divine feminine energy that we were harnessing. We had journeyed and immersed with the Goddess Éiru and rebirthed in our new identity reclaiming our Divine Feminine energy.

Transformational energy from our communal immersion evoked inner creativity and imagination manifesting in our artworks and production of artefacts.

For Tina, who brought her first painting 'The Goddess' to Lough Lugh, for the Lughnasadh immersion 2017 (see figure 12); the Goddess then became the focus of her paintings. Different Goddess images appears later in her own acrylic pour paintings; and in the acrylic pour paintings that we worked on together in Tina's workshops when the journey flowed out into the in between spaces between rituals, into our lives.



Figure 18: Photo Caroline Coyle, Tina Elliffe (2017) *The Goddess*, Acrylic on Canvas

As an artist, Tina explored her identity as an older woman through various artistic mediums. Uncovering layers of identity and sociocultural conditioning that had shaped her, Tina, through her own processing, transcended such experiences to embody her authentic self. In response to the question 'How do I identify myself?' Tina made a word collage that communicated the many roles and identities that she had adopted (see figure 13) and how she felt others also perceived her.



Figure 19: *How do I identify myself?* (Collage from Tina's poetry notebook, 20th March 2017) Photo Caroline Coyle (2018)

Tina has added in little notes and drawings around the descriptions. With teacher, she has written: 'maybe to some,' beside carer she has written 'yes!' and beside follower, she has written 'always.' Tina's collage encompasses the multiple components of identity.

As is the cyclical nature of reflection, I was drawn to the symbolic imagery of how we had cloaked ourselves in the mythological mantle of the Goddess, metaphorically and through our paintings. I visualised this mythological mantle at the weaving stage, each thread an aspect of our identity and inner being, woven together into a complex cloak of reclamation. Considering Mansouri (2014) work, I wondered what aspects of Tina's identity she as an older woman was still willing to protect and what elements had she outgrown?

In April 2017 Tina writes and chalk paints life as journey in her poem 'Life is like a Ship' (see figure 14):

#### **Life is like a Ship**

Life is like a ship,  
Sailing on the sea  
Without a sail, engine, or master  
To control the wheel.  
We drift and move and get swept along by life  
And the wind of change  
Sometimes smooth and clam  
And sometimes storms  
That blow our mind  
With no land in sight  
We scream and fight  
Late into the dark of night.

(Tina Reflective Diary, April 2017)

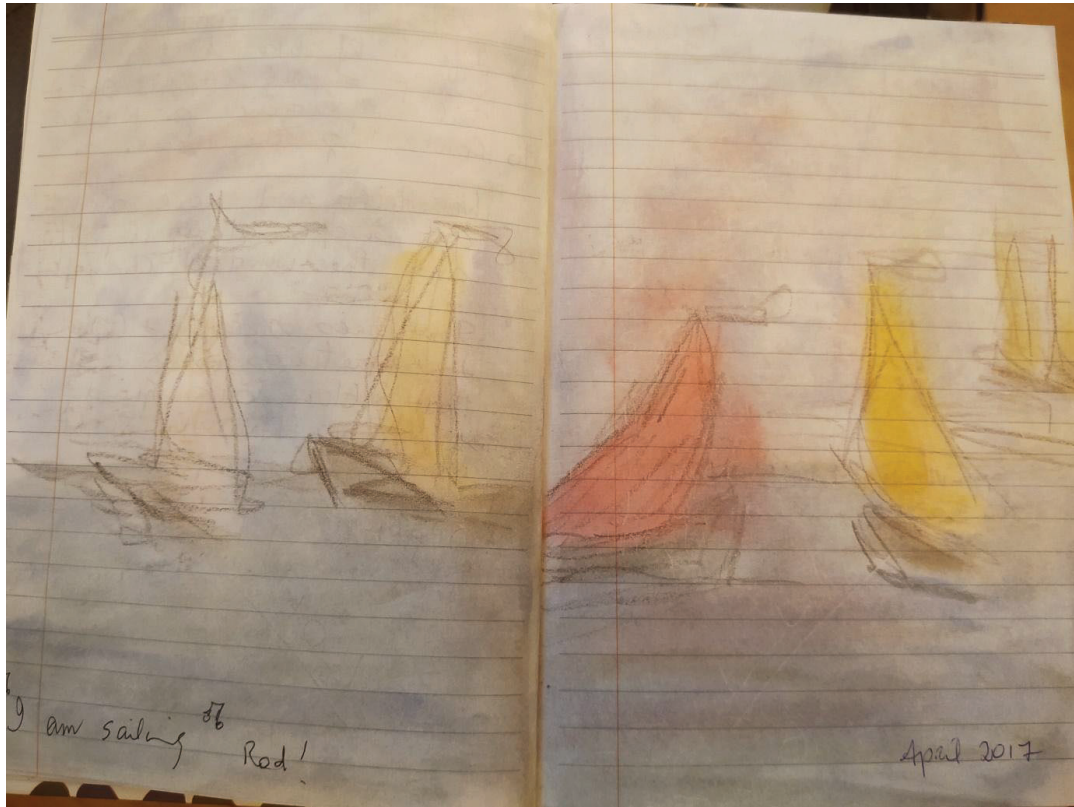


Figure 20: *Life is like a ship* (Tina's reflective diary, April 2017) Photo Caroline Coyle (2018)

Later in her journal, Tina drafts the poem 'An Unusual Journey,' in which she is on a train journey reflecting on her thinking about being older. She describes her physical journey on the train and draws the stops the train must make before it reaches its destination. She thinks about the journey she is taking, the psychological journey she has been on, the stations, the stops, the images, the rushing. 'As with this train journey, where I'm travelling forward,' she asks, 'Is it like you are looking back at your life - from a baby up to old age? Or time of death/passing, whatever... I'd like to think of it as moving into the stars.' She writes: 'It's here on the train that I begin to think of ageism, I Google the definition: 'prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age. 'It's funny that I should be thinking about ageism because this train and train of thought (both journeys are bringing me to Dublin to a course run by Active Age Ireland).'

(Tina, Reflective Diary, April 2017).

## **Train of thought**

Train

One in my mind, one a physical journey.

I know I'm an older person with regard to life and physical being but,  
in my mind,

I am still about 20

(Tina Reflective Diary, April 2017)

Tina draws the train carriages and each of them have the word thoughts on it. She writes to me: 'Caroline I'm really into this life journey thing today!!' (Tina, Reflective Diary, April 2017). She writes that we are forever moving, all over the world, our minds must be very busy, stations-only stopping to let one thought off and pick one thought up. Tina writes to herself: 'Mind Blowing. I need to figure this thought train out.'

She writes that the train journey has made her think about life:

Starting off slowly- Rushing and bumping, lots of noise from within and outside.

Slowing down-Drifting, waiting for the other train to pass.

Stopping-People in, People out.

Reaching the destination.

Starting all over again

Moving into the next station.

(Tina, Reflective Diary, April 2017).

Like Tina, I thought about the space we were occupying in the geographical and mythological liminal landscapes, knowing that our habited spaces are formed by our relations with them. 'I was thinking of the landscape and how we fitted in it and where we were going,' (Caroline Reflective Journal, April 2017)

My poem 'Immersed in Lough Lugh' is a reflection on the events that took place at Lughnasadh, written after the ritual, exploring the ways in which we had experienced the immersion individually and collectively:

### **Immersed in Lough Lugh**

In Lough Lugh,  
I stepped through to meet with the seven sisters  
Their veils shimmering croquet lace upon the lake  
I left my dress upon a scraggy bush  
And stepped into the waters of awakening space  
My fingertips dancing across the surface  
To clasp my sister's liquid hands  
Frogs blinking on the rocks in chorus  
A raven stands guard from the bank  
The orchestra of night song has begun  
As we immerse in alchemic waters.

Caroline Coyle, 2017

This poem explores our *Communitas of Sisterhood* stepping into the waters of awakening space for individual and collective transformation as older women in Irish society. Doreen Massey (1994) in *Space, Place, and Gender* assumes the position that all spaces are gendered. Within the context of this study, the *Geogendered Landscape* space which embodies, through the Goddess Ériu, the feminist qualities of equality, became a safe place for the exploration of the older woman's identity. As I reflected in later work on the process, 'a safe space had been fostered to share feelings, emotions and lived experiences,' (Coyle, 2018).

The transformational energy of the communal immersion consolidated our feelings of safety and security within the group. Rosemarie expressed that she felt the space was a special place to tell us of the loss of her grandchild through her poem; and the impact of grief on her identity. It was in the compassionate holding of the collective that Rosemarie felt she could be authentic enough to allow the most vulnerable aspects of her identity to be heard and validated.





*Figure 21: Photo Aine O Regan (2017) Lughnasadh at Lough Lugh (2017) Caroline Nicole Amy and Bridie*

Through the crafting of communal poetry at the rituals; we became banded into a higher consciousness mandala of sisterhood; our *Communitas of Sisterhood*. Subsequently, (as will be explored in the latter part of this study), participants began to conceptualise their response to the discourse on ageing and identity through their own 'creative mediums of understanding'.

### 6.2.3 Honouring the Ancestors at Samhain 2017

Dedicating the Celtic season cycle predisposed us consciously and subconsciously, to tuning into the cyclical philosophy of nature; tuning into our own somatic bodily rhythms; our internal notion of time; to examine our life stories in a considered way; to have the time, all the time in the world; to pull apart, dissect, unpack who we have been told we should be.

At Samhain, we gathered, as many generations of women before us had done, to honour the ancestors in a full Moon ceremony. The liminal festival of Samhain where traditionally communities would gather to honour the ancestors, is said to be a time when the Aos Si (spirits or faeries) could more easily traverse between Earth and the Otherworld.

Samhain marks the beginning of the dark half of the year, started in darkness and moving into the light. Like the Jewish and Israeli calendars today, the day begins at sunset. At this time, when everything in nature was dying and recycling back into the Earth; the ancestors looked forward to rebirth. Also, other cultures, at this time of the year, people visit graves and light candles (for example, the Day of the Dead in Mexico) to remember the dead. Fire is known as a cleansing purifying force, keeping evil at bay. With the introduction of Christianity into Pagan Ireland around 400 A.D., the existing festivals became assumed. The festival of Samhain later became the feast days of all saint's day and all soul's day. Today in Ireland, the month of November (Samhain) is dedicated to the rituals of remembering the dead and visiting the graveyards.

At Samhain, we brought food, fruits, and salads of the season to share for a communal meal. We dressed up warm for the wintry weather conditions and brought torches to safely navigate the land in the dark. Tina had asked me to bring a box of stones she had painted as gifts for everyone (see figure 22). She asks that as she could not be with us could we carry her with us in spirit. The concept of 'Carry me in the Stones' (Tina, Samhain, 2017) needs to be explored in further research.

I invited the women to pick out one of Tina's painted stone from the box as they went past me. If the landscape retains the memories of our ancestors, then the stones which became part of the rituals could 'soak up' or internalise the experience. Our painted stones would

always symbolise that day, that experience, that time. They would hold the secrets of our ritual experience in the Geogendered landscape. We then left our bags in the visitor centre and walked up the hill, chatting about the liminality of Samhain as we made our way up to Ail na Mireann.

Later, reflecting on the Festival of Samhain, I felt that, in the rhythm of our walking in the footsteps of the ancestors, chronological time had slipped away:

Walking up the hill today, one foot in front of the other, in the footsteps of the ancestors, I feel like we have all the time in the world to delve into this; that time has no meaning in this place, I'm walking here where I know someone has walked 5,000 years ago or 10,000 years or before that. In this place, time slips away from you; an entire day falls away from the light into the dark (Caroline, Samhain Writings, 2017).

We stopped to gather at the site of the Ériu sculpture, and Patsy told us her plans for Ériu's hair. Patsy made the visual structures/ sculptures in situ at Uisneach, which are testament to her knowledge and relationship of the sacredness of this landscape. Ériu's hair is decorated each year to reflect the theme of the Bealtaine Fire Festival. As we gathered around Ériu, Patsy gave us cuttings of the plant Rubis Tricolour, to take home and look after. Rubis Tricolour leaves a lush colourful climbing trail that can be braided to become Ériu's hair extensions. Patsy explained that, rather than planting new seeds, the cuttings she gave us came from her sculpture of the God Lugh, from the God Lugh's hair. Mythological symbolism was braided throughout the process. Our cuttings, nourished as part of the earth, part of growth and regrowth, under the ground and part of the sky; will, braided together, around the time of the Spring equinox, become part of Ériu's hair.

Following the sun, we walked to Ail na Mireann (The Catstone). Ruth welcomed us to the land which had a sense of homecoming for us and told us of the mythology and history surrounding the festival of Samhain. I spoke about the journey, our identity, how older women are seen in Irish society, how this liminal place was offering us a chance to search inside ourselves and reflect on who we are. I then introduced the rituals that we would participate in that day.

'This is Ail na Mireann, the access to the otherworld where Ériu is buried. She is here in these stones, trees, and the landscape. At this time of Samhain, the veil is so thin that one

may crossover. At the start of the harvest year, we celebrated Lughnasadh, now we mark the end of the harvest, honouring the ancestors and remembering those who have died in a full Moon ritual' (Caroline, Samhain, 2017).

I invited the women to leave their stones on the ledge of Ail na Mireann around the big blue stone, (making note of the colour of the stone they had, to collect later). Figure 22 depicts the stones. The large painted stone represents the Goddess Éiru surrounded by our individual stones.

Then, holding our stones, we followed Patsy's instruction to circle Ail na Mireann three times. It gave us a chance to touch the rock, see how it sits in the landscape, and feel the shape of the rock from different sides. In keeping with the sacredness of the number three within Celtic mythology, we walked around Ail na Mireann three times, the Divine three, the three aspects of the Goddess, which later assimilated into Christianity as the trinity.



*Figure 22: Photo Caroline Coyle (2017) Samhain- Carry me in the Stones*

For many cultures, as the moon symbolised the Goddess, the people came together at Samhain when the harvest had been gathered to honour the Goddess in a Full Moon ritual.

Gathering in Sisterhood, we honoured the revered status of the Crone elements in each other. We celebrated the three aspects of the Goddess: the young maiden, the mother,

and the Crone who symbolises wisdom (wisdom in the sense of intergenerational knowledge to help younger women to bring new life into the world and older women to pass to the next world) healing skills, and moral leadership.

Reflecting later I wrote: 'For me, the Crone represents the missing older woman represents the older woman from the modern world. The passing on of intergenerational knowledge to women is lost, the older woman role model for younger women is lost, the Crone needs to be reclaimed' (Caroline, Samhain writings, 2017).

Marked by the Celtic calendar as the beginning of out of the darkness and into the coming of light in mid-winter, here at this sacred place, we honoured Ériu in her true form, here at the very soul, where the sovereign Goddess of Ireland rests under the stone.

As it was windy, I invited the women into the womb of the tomb, into the centre of Ail na Mireann (see figure 23), 'We'll make room in the womb'. Standing together in the crevice was akin to the returning to the womb of the Goddess to be rebirthed in our new identity.



*Figure 23: Photo Caroline Coyle (2017) Ail na Mireann The Stone of Divisions with access to the Otherworld*

I read my poem 'Under the Track of the Children of Uisneach (Crossover to the Otherworld):

### **Under the Track of the Children of Uisneach (Crossover to the Otherworld)**

I have walked this way before,  
Many Moons, Many Suns,  
Faoi Sgríobh Chlann Uisnich  
In the glint of a blue-black sky  
My feet lifting and planting,  
One step in front of the other  
Scrunching the little stones into the earthen path  
Flattening the blade arrows of grass  
Imprinting stories into the scraw.  
On the hill of Uisneach  
Craeb Uisnig shadowed against the plains,  
Rooted to the centre, connected to the sky  
Guardian of the five provinces  
I put my arms around her and held her tight,  
Whispering poems of natural time into her bark.  
In the beautiful coldness of this place,  
Morrigna: Banba, Eiru and Fódla  
Answers me in the wind that soothes my face  
You are the stones  
You are the bones,  
You are from the ancestors of Uisneach  
You are the past, the present and the future.  
You are your mother, your sister, and your daughter  
You've crossed over to the Otherworld

Caroline Coyle, 2017

Here at the Catstone, the stone of divisions, the navel of Ireland, the very heart and soul of Ireland, the most sacred place in the country; people must have gathered to remember and honour the ancestors.

Surrounded in darkness, with senses heightened, Erica stepped forward to read her poem:

### **Release**

When the veil is thin  
The mist seeped through  
Fog drenched dreams  
Rise like dew  
In every cell  
A key is turned  
Ghosts step forward  
The past returns  
Absorbed awareness  
Of now and then  
Awaken slowly  
Breathe again

Erica Follows Smith, 2017

Erica's poem captured the sense of being between both worlds, where 'In every cell a key is turned' attaining 'absorbed awareness of now and then'. Erica's words captured the sense of this symbolic returning and emerging from the womb. She acknowledges the ancestor's movement between the worlds by acknowledging that 'ghosts' step forward.'

Rosemarie then recited her poem:

### **Festival of the Dead**

We are gathered here today and again in May  
Celebrating the Celtic festivals  
On this beautiful and sacred hill  
Marking the end of the harvest season  
Beginning of the dark half of the year  
Festival of the dead  
They are always in my head  
Reviewing the events of the last year  
Knowing you are no longer here  
Feeling your presence  
Such a present  
Getting great pleasure  
That is one thing for sure  
On this Samhain, a special Samhain  
Awakening the Goddess within

Rosemarie's connection to the dead is prevalent with their persistent presence: 'they are always in my head'. As mentioned earlier at Lughnasadh, Rosemarie felt safe enough within our space to share with us the untimely passing of her first grandchild. We see in her poem reference is made to her grandchild's presence straddling both worlds and the comfort that this brings to her:

'Reviewing the events of the last year  
Knowing you are no longer here  
Feeling your presence  
Such a present  
Getting great pleasure  
That is one thing for sure'

The poem communicates Rosemarie's experience of loss and grief this time; and how in this space, she finds comfort in connecting with her grandchild's presence. We, as the Sisterhood held Rosemarie in her grieving.

Dee felt compelled to read her 'Deirdre of the Sorrows' poem, which has a special connection with Uisneach:

#### **Deirdre of the Sorrows**

Born as all are  
With limitless potential  
Then fenced in by rules  
Bound by the ties designed for her safety  
She broke the rules, broke hearts  
Though desiring only to please  
She followed her heart and her heart's desire  
Without courage to stand firm and trust her instincts  
She pleased the masses  
Returned to her homeland  
Lost her beloved, lost herself  
Until she could take no more  
How apt that I was named for you  
Deirdre of the Sorrows  
Wife of the son of Uisneach

The theme of loss and grief is evident in Dee's poem, the pursuit of one's dreams, when we do not follow our heart's desire, the loss of self, the loss of others and the sorrows



experienced. Our personal sorrows shape us, imprint on our identity, and have the potential to change what we believed would be our life course direction.

Patsy then led us in a chant she had written for Bealtaine by substituting the word Samhain for Bealtaine. The women noticed how the light from the crevice shone directly on Patsy's face as she sang, like 'like the lighting up of the tunnel' (Caroline, Samhain, 2017).

### **Éiru's Fire**

Éiru we call you, your fires we light  
Fire eye shine brightly on Uisneach tonight  
Lugh, we call you, your fires we light  
Uisneach shine brightly on Samhain tonight

Áine then led the group in a singing round:

Women of Uisneach  
Women of Uisneach, gather around  
Women of Uisneach, gather around  
Women of Uisneach, gather around

Áine sang first, then the second voice, then third. We arranged ourselves into 3 groups of 4 and sang the round. It is so beautiful, almost haunting to hear a group of women singing out in the open air by Ail na Muireann. Patsy said the ancestors are 'thinking of us today.'

We then reclaimed our stones and walked down the hill to the visitor's centre for lunch. After lunch we sat outside the amphitheatre around the fire in the brazier. I spoke about the context for our gathering, acknowledged our journey thus far, and provided an overview of the evening's workshops, noting:

We're here in the amphitheatre. This has come together and has led from the idea that if we take a yearlong journey, we can travel through our own liminal space as women and discover whatever there is to be discovered along this journey to this liminal passage of awakening space (Caroline, Samhain, 2017).

Jancie then led us in a circle dance accompanied by Aine on the violin. In this fluid, organic, interpretive space; creative connections, interactions and collaborations took place and the production of artefacts increased. Everything happened organically - from the original idea of reflecting through poetry, the artists went on to make art, the musicians made music, the singers made songs and chants and the dancers made dance. Our creative work

appeared to reflect and refract through each other in this space, such as Aine's new musical composition written in response to my poem 'The Otherworld.'

After the dancing I led the poetry workshop facilitating the creation of the Samhain communal poem:

We are actually on the threshold today  
We are so close to the other world  
Poets are very much on the edge of things, of happenings of shifts in society  
And to capture an idea, a concept, a shift, or a movement,  
It's definitely some kind of organic movement  
What happened today?  
We not only went into the womb of Ail na Mireann  
We seemed to be in a liminal space there ourselves  
We sang, we chanted, we danced, we eat, we had a feast, we had a festival  
We had a ritual enriched by dancing, music, singing, words, and poetry  
And also, that feeling from the stones, from the trees, from the landscape,  
from walking through the fields,  
I felt we were close to the otherworld,  
I felt that I am of the bones  
But this is also about how you feel (Caroline, Samhain, 2017).

This concept of being of bone had been reverberating in my mind in the week leading up to the Samhain gathering. As I drove to Uisneach that day I heard a chant:

I am of the bones  
I am from the stones  
I am from the ancestors at Uisneach

After discussing the procedures of writing a few lines which we would add together, we took some time to think and write. The contributions did not have to go in chronological order, together we would weave them into a poem.

Maria shared:

We walk their fields  
We walk their path  
We walk their footsteps  
We make our own

And then, Erica:

Shelter, strength, sanctuary,  
Rock and flame.

Dee shared:

I stand in the liminal space  
On the threshold  
All boundaries blurred

Janice offered:

Connected by the past  
My heart races fast  
As I feel their memory  
Closing in on my soul with love

Rosemarie added:

As the crow or bird flies by  
I look to the sky  
Singing and joining in our song and dance  
At this special time

And Sadhbh:

I see the veil around me  
It lifts and lingers  
As it wraps around me  
Pulling and pushing me forward

Patsy shared:

The veil is thin  
So, they say  
And yet you feel so far away  
My heart at Uisneach calls to you  
A crow calls back

And then Aine:

The very first time  
Sheltered in the flank of an ancient stone  
That seeps the blood of ages

And lastly, Ruth:

This is a holy place  
A place of connections  
A place of divisions  
A place of unity  
A place central to our imagination  
Central to what it means to be Irish  
Central to what it means to be human  
Dance and song are part of what it means to be human  
Life leads to Death  
Death leads to Life

Finally, I read the constructed communal poem now titled 'I am of the Bones':

**I am of the Bones**

I am of the bones  
I am from the stones  
I am from the ancestors at Uisneach  
We walk their fields  
We walk their path  
We walk their footsteps  
We make our own  
Shelter, strength, sanctuary,  
Rock and flame.  
I stand in the liminal space  
On the threshold  
All boundaries blurred  
Connected by the past  
My heart races fast  
As I feel their memory  
Closing in on my soul with love  
As the crow or bird flies by  
I look to the sky  
Singing and joining in our song and dance  
At this special time  
I see the veil around me  
It lifts and lingers  
As it wraps around me  
Pulling and pushing me forward  
The veil is thin  
And so they say  
And yet you feel so far away  
My heart at Uisneach calls to you

A crow calls back  
The very first time  
Sheltered in the flank of an ancient stone  
That seeps the blood of ages  
This is a holy place  
A place of connections  
A place of divisions  
A place of unity  
A place central to our imagination  
Central to what it means to be Irish  
Central to what it means to be human  
Dance and song are part of what it means to be human  
Life leads to Death  
Death leads to Life

Maria B, then led us in visualisation and guided meditation, conceptualising and writing out our worries, shame, or guilt to burn in in the brazier. Maria's workshop finished the rituals of dance, communal poetry making and meditation at the amphitheatre; and we set off again up the hill for the full Moon Ritual (which was anticipated around 5.22pm).

Observing the traditions of old, Patsy had asked us to each bring a photograph or memento of a loved one who has passed, for the Full Moon ceremony so that their spirit could be remembered and welcomed (see figure 24). We left photographs and mementos on the altar that Patsy had set up in the visitor's cottage earlier that day.



*Figure 24: Photo Caroline Coyle (2017) Offerings, Photographs and Mementos at the Altar for Samhain*

In the Druidic tradition, to create a safe and sacred space to carry out any kind of energetic work or ceremonial work, a circle needs to be cast. Patsy tells us:

So, we're working with the three realms, you have the realm of the sky, and the realm of the sky holds all higher beings, our own higher selves, beams of light, angels, and then we work within the realm of earth, which is the known world which we can see, we can touch, we can feel and we can taste, it is the world we live in in our normal day to day life it is the world in which we act, and the realm of the sea represents the deep unconscious it links us all together and our ancestors, our spirit guides, and everything in the underworld.

Listening to Patsy's embracement of the intangible aspects of existence, not only the associations held with fellow humans, but with behaviours relating to the soul such as the search for the sacred in life interactions; one can understand the geotranscendent perspective being an integral aspect of her values and beliefs system. She communicates that importance of connecting with others around fire to engage in ritual:

I would sometimes meet with a Druidic group...I would, sometimes join in a circle with them or on my own and it's just a good way to connect in, you can make it as simple or as elaborate as you like, usually people would have a candle to represent fire, I just thought it would be nice to have an actual fire, small though it may be.

Patsy opened the Full Moon ceremony by honouring and calling in the elemental characteristics of the four directions:

To the East our connection to the air representative of our breathe and wind acknowledge; to the South the element of fire reflective the female forces of passion and creativity honoured; to the North the element of earth and rock on which we stood honoured; and finally West the element of water honoured as a cleansing and purifying force

Aligning with the directions in the sacred circle created a space for deep connection to the land. This helped us to realign with our own internal compass and become rooted in the Geogendered landscape. She then invited us to consider our ancestry, to acknowledge ourselves within the content of the first family to walk the earth:

Each one of us has a direct link through our grandparents and our great grandparents and their great grandparents right to the very first people that walked this earth. So, we as individuals are culminations of all of them, we are the end product and so I think it's important to honour that, to honour that ancestry and when we go back far enough, they're all one family, literally.

Patsy then passed around a piece of the bread, with the blessing 'May you never hunger'; a piece left to the land as an offering to our ancestors. The bowl of elderberry was passed around with the blessing 'May you never thirst' were spoken. Again, an offering of elderberry left down to the land to please our ancestors. Explaining her belief system, Patsy informs us that she believes:

We have many past lives and things run through families, often there are lessons that we are coming from times before maybe we don't know why things are happening, but we may be dealing with traumas from the past so even in the most challenging things that we face in our lives, there's always a gift, there's always a lesson. There's always a little pearl of wisdom and knowledge within the most traumatic situations that we ever have to endure. Uisneach for me personally is so incredibly special, I would been here with my partner, many times, who I lost to suicide, twenty years ago this year. So, when I come here, I connect with him. We drank at Finnleaseach's Well, so I'll go to the well and drink the water, so this always connects me to him in a very strong way.

The concept of loss and orienting ourselves after grief is conveyed in Patsy's words. Patsy embodies the land of Uisneach. Her connection to this land holds significant and deeply personal memories. Her presence here enables her to connect with loved ones who have passed. She communicates a sense of acceptance for what is; and has worked this through her art. As we age, grief and loss are an enviable aspect of the ageing process.

Acknowledging the need to demonstrate gratitude for the gifts we have from our ancestors, Patsy encourages each member of the group to express their personal gratitude.

Later in discussion after the Full Moon ritual, we felt close to the ancestors on the day, and left imbued with an energy, in honouring them, they were with us on this journey and into the future. The Catholic belief of meeting your ancestors in the next life, was replaced by the Celtic concept of your ancestors being all around you to support your journey through this mortal existence. This sentiment became a recurring theme across each woman's contributions and expressions of gratitude.

Maria B's contribution summarised beautifully what each of us had attempted to acknowledge and express that day:

I am thankful to my ancestors for all that I am and for all that the future holds, I'm thankful to everybody in this circle that the special group that it is... and all that's coming out of it... and for being able to become more of who I am and the joy of watching everybody else becoming more of who they are as well, becoming all that we're capable of being when we activate all that the ancestors have given us, so I'm grateful for everything and everyone and to Patsy for this.

Just then, as we offered our gratitude to the Full Moon, she rose from behind the land in her luminous glory, a huge circle force of light in a darkening sky. In that moment, it was as if we had walked into a different world, a different time, it was intense, every vibrating atom surrounding us vibrating and pulsating under the Moon's luminosity.

For those who participated, we found it a powerful sharing of music, dance, songs, chants, workshops, poetry, plants, stones, and rituals. To those who could not make it such as Tina and Ursula; they were there with us in the space; these friendships were going to last, that this was not the end, 'Things don't end at Uisneach, they only begin,' (Coyle, 2017).



#### 6.2.4 Reflection at The Winter Solstice 2017

After the transformative spaces in Lughnasadh and the movement between the thin veil of Samhain, the Winter Solstice Festival acted as a reflective stage. The rising of the sun on the Winter Solstice and its sunset is said to represent a Rebirth, a new beginning, a renewal of energy, from the darkness to the light. For this Festival, we reflected upon the symbolism of rebirth in relation to our identity, writing our reflections, thoughts, and poems in our journals to share at the Winter Solstice/Sunset event.

For this celebration, I wanted to make sure that Ursula would be included in the rituals. (Inclusivity is especially important to me and I had planned to adapt our original plans to climb the hill). Ursula, who is a cancer survivor and has a stoma bag; was with us since the start of the journey. She had been in hospital lately and was finding it difficult to walk. She missed the Samhain event through illness and was determined to make the gathering at the Winter Solstice. Ursula relayed that she had found a strength in the place, meeting with the women and taking part in the rituals. She felt she needed to come back to be revitalised in the energy of the place and the Sisterhood.

Patsy and friends had stayed overnight on the land to welcome in the dawn light. The women and I met in the car park around 9.45am that morning, Ursula drove up the hill and waited in her car, while we walked to the summit of the hill to read our poems. I made a plan that we would return to Ursula to include her poem in the readings.

Celebrating the Solstice light on the hill, Ruth spoke of the similarities of celebrating the Winter Solstice in Iran; when friends and family gather to eat, drink, and read poetry. Fruits such as nuts, pomegranates and watermelons are eaten. Ruth recited poems written by the 14th century Persian poet Hafez.

I then led the poetry session with my Poem Winter Solstice Light (Out of the Darkness into the Light)':

#### **Winter Solstice Light**

Out of the Darkness into the light  
A lengthening of day  
And a lessening of night

I have walked this Uisneach way  
My body is earthed to her core  
Energy renewed from beneath  
My Goddess is awakened once more  
I am a woman of this land  
This grass, this hill, lake, stone, and this tree  
I have become who I am  
I am me  
Know the words of my poems  
Hear my songs that I sing  
Listen to my music as I play  
As I dance through the rings  
I am in the dusting of snow  
Robins weaving patterns with their feet  
I am in the wind that she blows  
I am in her rain, her fog, her sleet  
I am reborn in her Solstice Sun  
This is the beginning  
And I have begun.

Sharon, who lives in London phoned earlier that morning asking that I read her poem that day. She had been with us at the Bealtaine festival in 2017 and continued to write in her journal ever since. Sharon expressed that the only thing keeping her going now was that she knows that she is going to be with us in May and she asked that she be with us today through her poem, and that we would think about her today. I thought about holding Sharon in the poem as I read it out:

### **From Darkness to Light**

The feelings begin  
Deep down in the core  
The sickness comes in waves  
The fear of the future is about to unfold  
The fight and flight start to kick in  
Once more on my journey, the battle begins  
Another journey of hurt and pain, deep in the darkness  
Hoping to see just a glimmer of light along the way  
God knows, I am with the Goddesses in spirit today  
My life is in your hands at Uisneach

Sharon's lines 'My life is in your hands at Uisneach' tells us she is aware that we are holding her metaphorically through the poetry readings and rituals at Uisneach. Again, the concept of holding someone in your poem, your art as their presence is a recurring theme at the rituals. It also speaks to the malleable properties of space and time that we can perceive some to be present with us in spirit without the need for physical presence. The women then read their poems. Rosemarie said, 'Just a few words, I'm not a poet or anything, 'and read 'Rebirth':

### **Rebirth**

Open my heart to creative heart  
Open my voice to be and sound nice  
Open my mind to be kind  
Open my thoughts to not get lost  
Open my energy to help me see  
Connect with our true self  
On this day, meditation may help  
Rebirth of the light  
As we chant and yelp with delight  
But the power of sound  
As we rejoice

We then walked down the hill to where Ursula was in the car. Patsy invited us to join the women Druids who were cooking on the fire at the Royal Palace nearby (see figure 25).



*Figure 25: Photo Nicole McKenna (2017) The Winter Solstice - Joining the women at the fire*

This was a short walk for Ursula, and we got a chair so she could sit at the fire. We were welcomed by the Druids to read our poems. It was so comforting to stand around the fire and get warm. A tin cooking pot containing a big piece of lamb was cooking on the fire. There was also a black kettle boiling for tea. The women were busy, chopping up vegetables and peeling potatoes.

Ursula held court from her chair and started reading her poetry (see figure 26). The smoke from the fire rose and we watched the embers burn up and glow. If we went back to the visitor's centre, we could lose the momentum, so I decided that we would stay here at the campfire, and I would facilitate the communal poetry workshop outside.



*Figure 26: Photo Nicole McKenna (2017) The Winter Solstice-Ursula holding court at the fire*

I explained the communal poem making and how we would construct it, starting off with the following two lines:

I am reborn in our Solstice sun  
This is the beginning and I have begun

Paula added:

The year has gone, and I am done

Mary:

I haven't been here before, but I have

Then Áine:

We join, we give and share, we are here

Rosemarie added:

Solstice sun begun, as I meant to go on

And Margaret (Patsy's friend:

Oh, what joy to be here!  
On this most special day of the year,  
Standing in Mother Earth's heaven,  
Where the wind blows and the birds sing,  
Away from busy Father Christmas,  
With the bling and where the sleigh bells ring,  
Thank you, Mother Earth, and great spirits, in the sky  
For this beautiful space in Uisneach.

Then Ursula:

I am awakening from the dark  
As I sit by the Winter Solstice fire  
In the grounds of the palace at An Uisneach  
I share the herb of basil to bring prosperity to all

And Chris:

I am visceral  
I am limbic  
I am woman,  
Alive

Then Erica:

Leave behind loss and heartache  
Muster courage  
Move in the Mist  
Stand for destiny  
Clear sight your dream  
Master challenge  
Never hunger  
You have, you are, you will be enough

And Patsy:

In the deepest darkest depths of the Winter  
In the deepest darkest depths of our soul  
The light of stars is born  
We are stars

Barbara added:

My journey on Uisneach  
It's been a joy  
This day will bring me light  
I will leave all behind me  
And feel some peace

And finally, Maria B shared:

The past is over, we start again  
Now is the moment, embrace the light

With these contributions, I stitched our collaborative poem together, titled 'Reborn in our Solstice Sun':

### **Reborn in our Solstice Sun**

I am reborn in our Solstice sun  
This is the beginning and I have begun  
The year has gone, and I am done  
I haven't been here before, but I have  
We join, we give and share, we are here  
Solstice sun begun, as I meant to go on  
Oh, what joy to be here!  
On this most special day of the year,  
Standing in Mother Earth's heaven,  
Where the wind blows and the birds sing,  
Away from busy Father Christmas,  
With the bling and where the sleigh bells ring,  
Thank you, Mother Earth, and great spirits, in the sky  
For this beautiful space in Uisneach.  
I am awakening from the dark  
As I sit by the Winter Solstice fire  
In the grounds of the palace at An Uisneach  
I share the herb of basil to bring prosperity to all  
I am visceral  
I am limbic  
I am woman, Alive  
Leave behind loss and heartache  
Muster courage  
Move in the Mist

Stand for destiny  
Clear sight your dream  
Master challenge  
Never hunger  
You have, you are, you will be enough  
In the deepest darkest depths of the Winter  
In the deepest darkest depths of our soul  
The light of stars is born  
We are stars  
My journey on Uisneach  
It's been a joy  
This day will bring me light  
I will leave all behind me  
And feel some peace  
The past is over, we start again  
Now is the moment, embrace the light.



*Figure 27: Photo Nicole McKenna (2017) Ruth and Erica - Mythology by the fire at The Winter Solstice*

Afterwards, Áine played some tunes on the violin and Margaret, one of the women joined in on the tin whistle (see figure 27).



*Figure 28: Nicole McKenna (2017) Music by the Fire*

It was lovely to meet with the women and listen to their stories, watch the smoke from fire burning, the food cooking, read our poetry, listen to the music and be a part of their celebration, developing new friendships along the way.

#### 6.2.5 Rebirth: Imbolc February 2018

Honouring Brigid was also integral to this journey, as she is the embodiment of the triple Goddess, she is 'the goddess whom poets adored,' (Wright, 2011. pp. 26-27). For the Imbolc Festival the women reflected upon the symbolism of the Pagan Goddess Brigid and her associations in relation to their identity through their reflections, thoughts, or poems in their journals. On 5th February 2018 we arranged to meet at Brigid's well; a well in an enclosure of trees in Killare about 5 minutes from Uisneach. It is believed that this well was part of the landscape of Uisneach in the Celtic times.

Patricia travelled with me in my car. Coming along to celebrate the ritual of Imbolc was going to be Patricia's first time joining us. Although she had never been to Uisneach, she was aware of it, saying that she knew that it was 'a sacred place and how powerful that can be,' (Patricia, Pre-Imbolc, 2018). On the way over, we talked about Uisneach, my study and



the rituals that had taken place so far. Patricia had previously heard me talk about the year-long journey that we were on and had really wanted to come along before this.

As a biodynamic therapist, Patricia is in tune with the healing powers of nature. We talked about light, healing, energies and nature, the walks that she had been on all over the world and her connection to nature. Patricia said:

I'd heard about the celebration of the seasons and the story of the women coming together reading poetry and I really wanted to come along and join in. I was working up the courage to do that, come along and meet; the women and today was the day that I felt I just had to go, while there were many things getting in the way of me going today, I just stopped and said to myself, I must go today, I must stop thinking about everything else, put myself forward in this and go, this is what I must do (Patricia, Pre-Imbolc, 2018).

I had known Patricia since we were children, we remained close, and have a friendship going back to our schooldays. We talked about our secondary school days and growing up in the 80s. Patricia and I were both interested in art and poetry from an early age.

With regards to the literature on the value of friendship, Moe's study on friendship, social support in life through sisterhood can act as a safety net providing support and buffering stress. Fritz Horella (2020, p.1) identifies the value of women friends as we age. 'Sisterhood has been generally associated with face-to-face relationships, specifically between women, or groups of women, who enrich each other in the context of their struggles against patriarchy.'

It is funny sometimes how even though you have not seen someone in over thirty years, you can fall into where you left off with them. In 2000, when I came back from living in England for 12 years, Patricia and I ended up being neighbours across the road from each other.

We talked about the poems written when we were at secondary school. We both have written poetry and published in the school magazine; have an interest in art, poetry, nature, and spirituality. Without realising it, we were reflecting on what we had written at the time and why we wrote. Why we wrote was important. And here we were, forty years later.

We parked at the Uisneach Inn. it was a beautifully chilly day, blue sky with the fresh coldness that I enjoy. Ursula, Rosemarie, and Mary parked beside us, and Ursula came over to the car with a tin box of handmade Brigid's crosses. Herself and Rosemarie had spent the day before making them from reeds that Rosemarie's husband had gathered. Ursula explained that there were many different crosses from different counties, and she showed us the old type three legged cross and the Donegal cross and crosses that they had made from several types of material, reeds, copper, silver wire. She suggested that we could each take a cross and bring it with us to the well and later we could make our own cross, we could gather reeds from the field, and she also brought reeds as well. The others came along - Aine, Dee - and we started to walk to Brigid's well.

The well itself was not visible from the road, a weathered white thin steel arch with the words St Brigid marked the entrance to the field. Straight ahead was a stile leading into a large clump of tall trees (see figure 29).



*Figure 29: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Imbolc - Gateway to St Brigid's Well in the enclosure at Killare*

As it was only a short distance away, we walked along the roadway to get there. One by one we went in through the arch and stepped down two slab steps into a field, where the ground was soft, and you could hear the mud squelching under our boots. There were reeds in the field, and some stopped to pick them. We then filed through the stile and walked through an opening in the trees to an oasis. Tall trees sheltered a hidden sanctuary. A large well of water surrounded by a heart shaped stone structure sprung up from the ground and led under a little stone bridge into a field nearby. Everyone was surprised about the size of the well, it was not a usual small spring well, it looked like a miniature lake with a stream leading away into the nearby field (see figure 30).

A grotto built of old stone slabs stood at one side under an oak tree. The stone was distinctive mottled with lichen, moss and bleached in parts. In the grotto stood Our Lady, Mary, with her blue and white dress, arms outstretched. Other mementos were left there, flowers, candles, photographs, even an inhaler (to pray for relief from breathing problems). In the back at one side was an older looking statute, black and greenish. I took it out, it had been there to represent Brigid.



*Figure 30: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Imbolc- Grotto by the Well*

This place was in the middle of nowhere, none of us had been here before. We spent some time taking in the beauty of the place, it was as if we had walked into a different world, a different time. I reflected in my field notes:

I noticed that some of the women voiced how they felt about the place as they walked around the spring, noticing the colours, textures, nature, trees, to the background noise of the spring water running. Some of the women walked down the stone steps and collected the spring water in small bottles. (This water is thought to have cleansing and healing properties, Erica kept a bottle in her fridge and said the water tasted distinctly good). One of the women blessed herself with the water from the well (Caroline, field notes Imbolc, 2018).

Some of the women touched the laid down stones, the trees, some looked at the Grotto, picking up the relics/mementos, reading the inscriptions. My eyes were drawn to a china plate in the Grotto. I took it out to see it had 'My Kitchen Prayer' written on it (see figure 25) and remembered seeing that prayer hanging up in my grandmother's house in the countryside. I thought to myself, well 'There's the two grandmothers.' I had honoured my granny Rose at the Samhain event by bringing her photograph and coat; and now as I lifted out the china plate, my other granny, MaryAnn, came into my mind taking me back to her cottage in the country, her kitchen, open fire, orange lilies in the garden and a well near her orchard. I took the kitchen plate out and read 'My Kitchen Prayer' aloud to all.

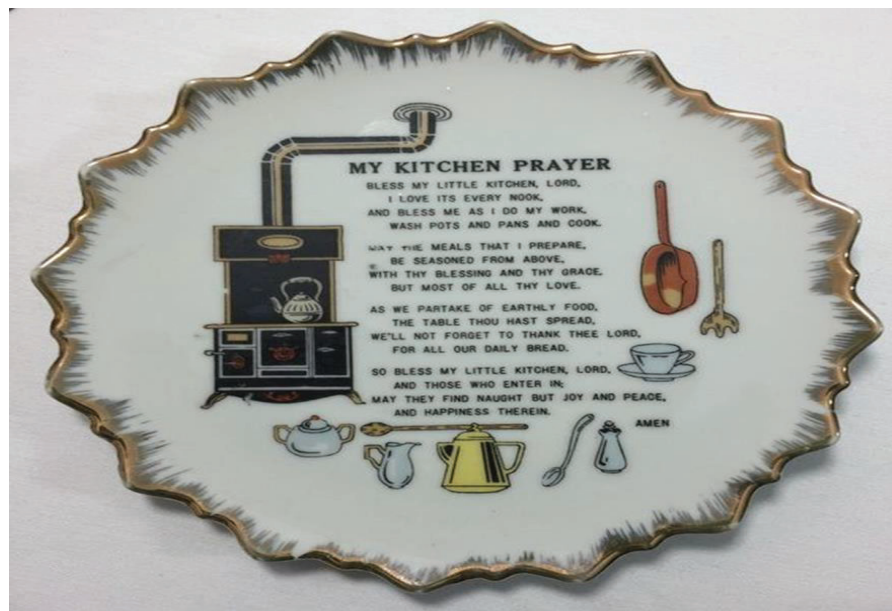


Figure 31: Caroline Coyle (2018) Imbolc-The Kitchen Prayer

Some of us had laid our Brigid's crosses on the ground. Ursula had brought her bodhran (goatskin drum) with her to drum. She also laid the bodhran down on the ground and we put their Brigid crosses into the bodhran (see figure 32).



*Figure 32: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Imbolc - Ursula with the Bodhran*

Ruth gave a talk on the historical and mythological references of the Goddess Brigid.

I then commenced by reading my poem, Brigid Goddess of the Poets:

### **Brigid, Goddess of the Poets**

Brigid, Triadic Goddess  
Born at sunrise, a towering flame behind your head  
Solar suns rotate, Comet cross create  
Brigid of the Fire, Sun, and the Earth  
The Poet, the Healer, and the Smith  
She of the Danu,

Daughter of Dagda and the Morrighan,  
Sister of Ogma, Creator of the Ogham  
Wife of Bres of the Formorians,  
Mother of Ruadan, Luchar and Uar  
Mistress of the Mantle,  
Moulder of the Metal  
Patroness of the Poets,  
Protector of the Children, Childbirth and Women  
Guardian of the Oxen, Boar and Sheep  
Spirit of the Water, Weather, and the Skies  
Brigid, the Goddess whom the Poets adored  
At Imbolc, the Milking of the Ewes  
Throw your mantle over Uisneach,  
Pave the way for us to sing the Blessings of Spring.

Brigid, the Spark, the Flame, the Light,  
I make this tripartite pledge  
By Earth, Sea, and Sky,  
To be renewed in you,  
Through the rituals of the Women at the Well  
Through the vibration of the poems that float along the spring  
Through the violin the sings the music of lives past,  
Through our chants, our songs, our friendships, our cries from the heart  
Through our bodies entranced in dance around the fire,  
Through the painted stones, the planted oaks, the jewellery, and art  
Through the sacred land that we stand upon  
Through the life water springing from the ground  
Through the cleansing air from the trees  
Through the coldness of the azure sky  
Through the roots of the oak, hawthorn, yew, and ash  
Through the knowledge of the birds, frogs, cows, foxes, hares, rabbits,  
and bees  
Through the heartbeat of the mountains, lakes, caves, rivers, bogs, and  
ditches,  
Through the breath of snowdrops, crocuses, herbs of sage and heather  
Through the flowers, trees, Mother Earth, and fire,  
Through the drumming of a beat, Healing as a way of life.

Brigid, Goddess of Peace and Unity  
The Wise one, Fertile, with Powers Divine  
We are your Children, Maidens of the Otherworld  
Birthed through the matrilineal line  
Great Mother of the Celts, Exalted one,  
Bridged between worlds,  
Your fertility awakens our light,  
Your oak tree cradles us,

We ride on the wind of your inspiration  
Through the feminine power of this sacred place  
At night, we trace our life across the stars,  
Sterope, Merope, Electra, Maia, Taygeta, Celaeno, and Alcyone,  
Specks of cosmic dust shimmer,  
Blue filaments of Hope  
Energy of the sisters creates a new shape  
The keening of poetry heals,  
A swaying violin soothes the dance air  
Notes of our ancestor's women's song  
Crafted through the Sun, Moon, Sea, Wind and Stars,  
Reunion of the Goddess with the God

Each of the participants began to read their poems in turn (see figure 27) and after the readings, Ursula beat her bodhran closing the ritual.



*Figure 33: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Imbolc -Patricia reading Poetry at St Brigid's Well*

I loved the place, I loved the coldness of the fresh air and the intensity of the colours of this place, it was from another time, and I wondered about the people who had come here

thousands of years ago to honour the Goddess Brigid, they would have seen the same colours that nature has painted.

An enclosure had been made by the trees, a natural circular amphitheatre. Nature's colours were vivid, the mottled green on the old stones, the grey and white speckled slabs, the verde green in the spring water, the carpet of moss green, and orange-brown residue of twigs, leaves under the oak trees, the white snowdrops, and the cold azure blue sky. I consciously breathed in the freshly made tree air. Beside the Grotto, a large tree had split revealing an empty core, branches were knotted and gnarled around it. I placed my silver wire Brigid's cross into its bark to photograph (see figure 34).





*Figure 34: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Imbolc-Brigid's Cross at Brigid's Well*

An old picture frame leaned up against the tree and snowdrops bent their white heads in union as if bowing to the tree. I had not noticed the light filtering through at the time but when I looked at this photograph later, I had captured the streams of light refracting in the frame (see figure 35).



*Figure 35: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Picture Frame - St Brigid's Well*

Tina had kindly sent a special gift of a young oak tree to everyone to honour Brigid on this day (see figure 36) and we thought of Tina as we divided up the trees. As in Samhain when she was with us in the stones, she was with us at Imbolc in the trees.



*Figure 36: Photo Rosemarie Langtry (2018) Tina gave us small Oak Trees to bring home to plant*

We had been there a couple of hours (from 12 till 2pm) and it was getting really, cold, stone cold. We then made our way up to the visitor's centre (an old, restored cottage) at Uisneach where we had a welcome cup of tea and lunch. After lunch Ursula facilitated

her workshop - Making Brigid's Crosses / Celtic Sun wheel/Solar Cross. First, she demonstrated how to make it, then gave everyone reeds, scissors, and natural ties to make their own. We were gathered around the open fireplace, and I thought of how it must have been for women long ago as they would have worked together in a group, working on the land together, digging potatoes, saving hay, and making things together, being creative together, making wool, clothes, Brigid's crosses. I was again reminded of the Irish word Meitheal (meaning working together in a group). It was satisfying to complete the crosses together. I sat next to Collette, and she talked about how therapeutic making the crosses were.

As we chatted, laughed, and concentrated together making the crosses (see figure 37), I thought how rare it was for women to get a chance to come together and work creatively. Unless a space is created, then there will not be a space.



*Figure 37: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Brigid's Crosses*

While I was making the Brigid's cross, I reflected on our time at the well. These words came to me, and I decided to make them the start of the communal poem:

From the rushes at the well  
Is the story I will tell  
Brigid guides us on our way  
In the world we live today

I then facilitated the communal poetry workshop, inviting the women to reflect on the day, write a few lines how they were feeling about their experience coming together through ritual to honour the Goddess Brigid. I then gave them my first few lines to start the poem and we sat in silence, reflecting for a time, and writing, there was no time limit, there was no specific order, it was left to flow as naturally as the previous communal poems. Once everyone was ready, I started with the first two lines and it went around the women in turn, adding the lines, until the end.

I wrote down the lines as they were being spoken and at the end read it back to everyone as one complete poem. It was lovely to hear the words being read back to you, listening to the poem had a satisfying effect, as if it reinforced that we would continue in our friendships. It was also very moving to reflect on how Brigid could almost 'work through us' to be a strong woman in her footsteps. One of the lines in the poem 'Weaving friendships built to last' became the title:

### **Weaving friendships built to last**

From the rushes at the well  
Is the story I will tell  
Brigid guides us on our way  
In the world we live today  
From the shadow of the oak  
I stepped into the sun  
Its warmth soothes my soul  
And writes reflections on the well.  
I loved the patterns of the cross  
The intricacies, the ins and outs  
Such a peaceful place  
Such a beautiful place  
Such a special place  
A little white feather  
Memories of loved ones gone  
Puts a smile on my face  
Today touched my heart  
To be part of the past

A green copse of foliage  
Hush and feeling  
The stone carved failte warmed us  
The spring cold froze us  
And we shared moments and thoughts  
From the past in our shadow  
To the future in our light  
Our ancestors have been guided  
By Imbolc and Brigid  
On this day St Brigid  
We blessed ourselves  
With water from our well  
With the strength of the oak tree  
I ask for light  
To guide us on our way  
St Brigid, La le Bride  
As old as time  
Yet bring newness to my mind  
Spring, light and growth  
The stirrings of renewed hope  
Reflections in the pool  
Then laughter in the round  
Stories, food and craft  
Weaving friendships built to last  
Brigid, the exalted one  
The Bright one  
Laurel of Ireland  
Bless those we love  
Spread your compassion all over this land.

To finish the day, Aine played her fiddle, I accompanied her on the bodhran, we sang, and I called out a yodelling (like a tribal cry) and the women joined in. From the feedback on the day, there was a real sense of elation, being able to come together at Uisneach at Imbolc emanates powerful feelings and emotions, the drumming, fiddle, singing added to those feelings.

I decided to observe Patricia as it was her first time to be here at Uisneach and to meet with the other women. She was looking forward to the day and was relaxed and seemed happy. She loved the idea of joining with other women to read poetry at a sacred place, Brigid's well. She told the group that her poem meant something special to her and I could tell that she enjoyed reading the poem aloud to others. After the readings, Patricia said 'thank you for inviting me to this special place.' Patricia chatted to different women in the

group, one of the participants, Dee, was also in our year at secondary school, so they both got to catch up on years passed.

While we were at the visitor's centre at Uisneach, Patricia enjoyed making the cross at the workshop and I noted her chatting with the others and laughing, and Patricia enjoyed constructing the communal poem. At times throughout the day, I noticed that Patricia closed her eyes and held her arms out, thumbs and fingers together (as if in meditation). Afterwards I noticed that Patricia was quiet and going to the car, I asked her if all was, okay? Patricia told me that once we set foot on Uisneach, she had been overcome with how powerful the place was, that she could feel the energy coming up through her body, it was all encompassing, it was powerful, she felt overcome by the energy. I had known that some people say that when they enter the grounds of Uisneach, they can feel it in their bones that they are at a sacred place. And I was also aware that Patricia is open to all energies. I thought about the correlation between being open to receiving energies to feeling energies.

Reflecting on the day, I returned to the conversation I had with Patricia in the car on the way over, about how and why we drafted those poems when we were younger. For myself, I thought of writing poems 'as a way of putting something down on paper that you could not verbally say. Thoughts were screaming in my head to get out and writing them was a release.' Retrospectively, writing poetry while it was an innate thing that was a natural thing to do, unknown to myself it was a form of creative release from living in a collective consciousness context of Church and State.

I thought about Brigid. The people's belief in the power of Brigid at the time must have been so strong that she could not be 'annihilated or killed off', she was simply reconstructed/refashioned (made in the eyes of our Lord) as a saint for her and her followers to 'step into Christian Ireland'. I do not remember learning about a parallel time in history when Pagan Celts practiced alongside Christianity (around 400 A. D). How did a country so immersed in their pagan traditions ethnolinguistically Celtic, and rituals convert to the mass cultural change of Christianity, what methods were used? How were people enticed, converted, encouraged, how exactly did it happen, was it over a couple of hundred years?

Reflecting on the day, this day/journey was like a spiritual retreat, a space and time was made in this place to reflect about oneself. In this modern world, we do not often get a chance to reflect on who we are or reflect on your identity with a group of other women.

### 6.2.6 Closure and Celebration Bealtaine 2018

To acknowledge the ending of our collective journey and celebrate the beginning of what was to become our re-entry as authentic self into contemporary society; I reflected on the evolution of our *Communitas of Sisterhood*; how we shared experiences in the yearlong journey of rituals and experienced liminality together (Turner, 1969); reflecting on the synergy between *communitas* and the Irish concept of *Meitheal*.

Bringing the women together to conclude the journey, both ethically and ritualistically was important to me. I had an ethical responsibility to ensure that all the women were present for the closing ritual at the Bealtaine Festival 2018.

At Bealtaine 2018, we met for the final ritual, sharing our poetry, song and food. Rosemarie gifted us with the triskelion pendant. There was an air of festival around us, the drums were beating, and the chanting had begun. The women on horseback leaned into our ritual as the horses drew closer to the music (see figures 38 and 39). Erica's mother and Maria's daughter had joined us for this celebration. It was such a joyful day and we were excited to see the bonfire being lit that evening. This closing and celebratory ritual provided us with a space to celebrate; a space to grieve; and a space for the women to return to their individual journey; taking with them the accumulation of wisdom and experience that they had gathered across the lifespan of the study.





*Figure 38: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Bealtaine 2018*



*Figure 39: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Bealtaine 2018 Erica and her Mother*

### 6.3 Conclusion: Reclaiming Identity and Sovereignty - Triskelic Journeying through Geogendered Landscape, and the Legacy of Creative Collaboration

When we started the journey at Bealtaine May 2017 at the site of the Royal Palace of Uisneach; we stepped off the edge into the unknown. In this Geogendered arena; we as older women were performing as we wanted to; in a space where we could take off the 'socially constructed crosses upon our backs,' (Caroline, Reflective Journal, Post-Bealtaine, June 2018).

Our next festival was Lughnasadh in August when we met for the communal immersion in Lough Lugh; to strip away the social construction of what society has defined older women to be. Then at Samhain in October, we gathered at Ail na Mireann (the Catstone), under which Ériu is buried; to chant, sing and recite our poems. Back down beside the visitor's centre, we joined together in dance and music in the amphitheatre.

Through our participation in the Festivals of the Seasons rituals; the women and I forged a *Communitas* of Sisterhood; the contextual arena of the sacred and mythological landscape place of Uisneach became a living organic theatre, a performance site; in which we, as older women occupied the centre stage to perform our authentic selves. Journeying through Geogendered landscape provided the movement in which we physically; metaphysically; and spiritually; engaged with this place and space (a landscape site which historiography, mythologically and spiritually embodies the philosophy of women's connection with nature, embracing the qualities of the Goddess, the Divine Feminine and the feminist qualities of social egalitarian collaborative society).

By putting on the mythological mantle we cloaked ourselves in the mythology of Goddess empowerment (embodying the Goddess Ériu, her sovereign power, and access to the Otherworld). Our poetry revealed that the embodiment of Eriu's energy became the resource for transformation. Findings indicate that the taking on of the mythological mantle through participative rites of passage through ritual; empowered us; collectively and individually; to negotiate the conflicting discourses around ageing and visibility present in mediated culture. As a result, an opportunity was provided to intrinsically internalise a physical; spiritual; and psychological authentication of ourselves as older women.

The ancient motif of the Triskele or Triskelion symbol is important to my study as I explored above in the literature review. This Neolithic era symbol of three conjoined spirals appeared throughout the women's art; and Rosemarie made a triskele pendant to gift to each of the women.

Through the occurrence of what I call Triskelic journeying through Geogendered landscape; I use the triple spiral of the Triskele to symbolise the energy of the triple spiralling that is taking place; physically; cognitively; and spiritually. Thus, in the context of the Geogendered landscape, Triskele journeying consists of the tri-spiral of:

1. Spiralling through ritual
2. Spiralling within to the self
3. Spiralling along with and within our *Communitas of Sisters* (see figure 34).

Triskele journeying through Geogendered landscape; we spiralled through ritual as ageing women to the self; we spiralled with the *Communitas of Sisterhood*. We spiralled to remove the intergenerational shame stitched into our skin. We spiralled for our mothers, grandmothers, great grandmothers; spiralling all the way back to the Goddess Ériu. We spiralled for our ancestors. We spiralled for all the women, children and men who suffered under the patriarchy. We spiralled to break the cycle of 'transgenerational trauma transmission' (Denejkina, 2017, p. 1). Spiralling to our authentic identity as an older woman; we spiralled to be recognised as belonging, visible, and equal in society.

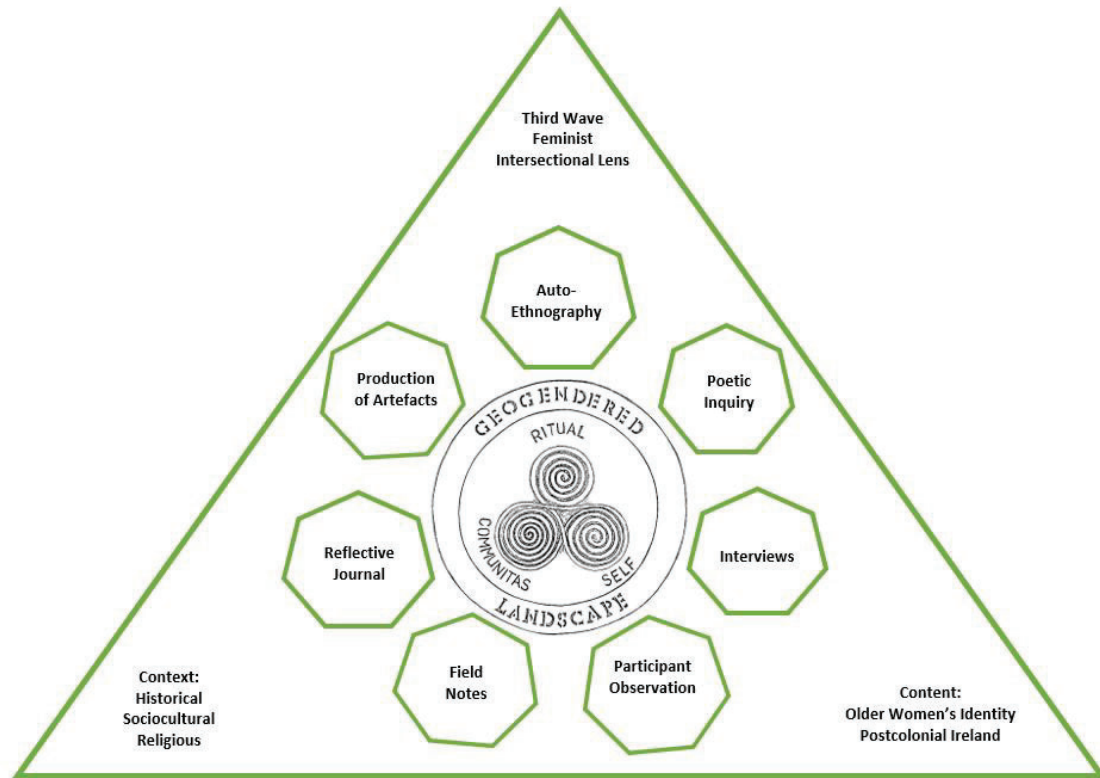


Figure 40: Triskelic Spiralling through Geogendered Landscape Model

At times, this journeying process allowed us 'to access a higher level of individual and collective consciousness or 'flow' of energy'. We experienced this sense of 'flow'; what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) from his investigations of 'optimal experience' called a state of consciousness; during the process of the yearlong journey. The women expressed feelings of being in the 'flow'; in 'the creative flow'; of 'being able to flow'. In conceptualising 'flow' 'as an energy or a higher state of consciousness, through arts based research (ABR) in ageing research; findings propose that it occurred as a result of the interpretive methodological approach; which was loose enough for participants 'to step off the edge' 'geographically and metaphorically; individually, and collectively; consciously, and subconsciously; whilst being 'as strong as spider's silk' for participants to feel connected to each other and to the process.

The art-based practices central to this study emerged organically throughout the journey. The artists created art; the singers wrote songs; the musician composed music; the dancers performed dance; the jewellery makers made jewellery; and the craftswomen weaved

Brigid's Crosses. It also became apparent that this individual and collective higher consciousness of energy was fluid, spilling offsite into our everyday lives through our own creations and the organic instigation communal workshops of encaustic paintings, acrylic pour paintings and painted stones.

Findings indicated that the organic appearance of art based practises throughout the process can be attributed to a number of factors; the shared safe space in this liminal, geographic and mythological place; the trusting relationship the women and I shared; the 'Mandala of Sisterhood' which evolved through the relationships; the access to a higher level of individual and collective consciousness or 'flow' of energy; the participant's own creative medium of understanding; and primarily; the fluid creative medium of poetic inquiry methodology through which all else flowed. Flow also featured as I interviewed Tina for the final interview as we were both painting, we were in the flow.

During the journey, art making also organically flowed out into the inbetween spaces of everyday life beyond the TimeSpace. In these in between spaces we met to create individual and collaborative artworks (see figure 41).



*Figure 41: Photo Bridie Breen (2018) Inbetween Spaces- Collaborative Painting*

With Brewster's invention of the kaleidoscope in 1816 (Huhtama, 2013); the viewer was enabled to create structured geometric patterns from reflected mirror images of shards of coloured glass fragments. By rotating the optical device, various abstract forms, densities,

and colours converge; causing multitudes of changing reflective and refractive glass shards to transform into symmetrical 'patterns of meaning'. McKenzie (in Prendergast, Leggo and Sameshima, 2009) uses the metaphor of fusing glass fragments to explain 'poetic renderings of experience', stating that 'Fusing glass is a process of fluidity as variations of glass are cut and shattered, yet these fragments join together into something seemingly concrete and unified through the heat of momentary insight or the kiln,' (p.73).

In my study, the creation of poetry, art and the production of artefacts, enabled us to enter a flow state; within which; an opening for discourse occurred, around understanding, negotiating, and making meaning of our identity as older women in Irish society. Findings indicated that as we journeyed through the Celtic Festivals of the Seasons; the complex mix of mythology, landscape, poetry, art, time, space, ritual, and place converged; causing a kaleidoscopic reaction which stimulated reflective and refractive responses through our individual and communal art-based mediums.

Framing the Heptagonal methodological model through a kaleidoscopic lens; I visualised the seven methods as moving parts, constantly reflecting and refracting off each other. What was referred to in interview could be reflected and/or refracted through the production of artefacts or poetry or song to extend the model to a reflective and refractive understanding. Autoethnographically what I wrote in self-reflection; or saw in participant observation has the potential to be reflected in my poetry/painting/chant.

Viewing the interplay of creative methods kaleidoscopically; may lend itself to the identification and analysis of new patterns of meaning; with a possibility of a new insight into the views being presented and how we interpret them.

Participating in the study energised our creativity. Ethically, I felt an obligation to be there with; and for; the women in their respective creative work for the past five years. As the women said, staying creative is important to overall health and the legacy of our creative collaborations lives on. Many of us have worked together on various artworks, radio documentaries, music and poetry projects and some of us have collaborated on academic work. Since the journey, I've found that my art practice has a defined community activism focus. In 2019 I began a trilogy of collaborative community arts and theatre performances

inviting the community to: Link Hands across the Bridge to celebrate the Goddess Sinnan (Figure 64, pp.337-338); and in 2020: to Shout out for Sinnan (Figures 67-70, pp.339-340) with the third artwork in collaborative with Athlone Family Resource Centre to facilitating young girls to write and illustrate their story of Sinnan. Other projects included a performance of Songs of the Goddess Ireland's first national bank holiday celebrating Brigid (figures 75-77, pp.344-346) and in 2023, the creation of a song Immersed in Boggy Waters for the Bean Feasa Project (figure 79, p.347).

A wider societal discussion is needed on the implications of creativity and wellbeing policies for older women. The women expressed how participating in this journey impacted their lives, creativity and wellbeing in many ways. Sharon reflected, 'How do we feel as older women after the journey? We feel fantastic and we are going to make it, whatever comes our way,' (Sharon, Post Bealtaine, Final Interview 2018). Tina, in her final interview suggested:

This space gave us time to think about ourselves...It was making us look at our own identity and look at our inner selves. We all have our inner selves and where we are coming from and what was important to us and a lot of people got different things... We all got something different...But now I feel my life is back, I have my life back. I kind of didn't know where I was going myself and you suggested that I should look for something different in your art form. And I came across the acrylic pour, and I thought to myself it looks like fun! Our journey began with an acrylic pour, and it is ending with an acrylic pour! (Tina, Post-Bealtaine, Final Interview, 2018).



*Figure 42: Photo Kate Elliffe Bannon (2017) Tina's Solo Art Exhibition*

Throughout the journey we expressed our identities as ageing women by creating art, dance, song, music, and rituals. This creative expression of one's identity as an older woman overflowed into our lives in between the ritual celebrations. As a result of the ritual's rite of passage, we found ourselves exploring beyond the post liminal; exploring beyond the post liminal spaces and places; we had taken away what resonated; and transferred our insights, to and in, other in between spaces and places in the everyday. The unleashing of this creative energy gathered momentum in various creative mediums. Signifying the ongoing impact of this study, since 2018, the women and I have gone on to have solo and collaborative art exhibitions; written and published poetry; and produced several radio documentaries. Finally, I had my first solo exhibition after 30 years painting and creating (see figures 43-44).





Figure 43: Photo Philip Mann (2018) Caroline's Solo Art Exhibition 'On the Edge'



Figure 44: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Caroline's Solo Art Exhibition

Erica produced three radio documentary series at Athlone Community Radio, specifically influenced by the *Awakening the Goddess Within* journey. Inspired by the openness of the women's discourse of ageing, identity, and menopause on the journey with regards to the first documentary, *Awakening the Goddess Within* (2017); Erica, subsequently decided to lift the veil on the silence surrounding the lived experience of menopause.

The Athlone Community Radio *MnáPause* documentary (uses 'Mná' which translates as women in Gaelic, as part of the title to reflect that this programme represents the experience of menopause in an Irish context), is a 13-part radio documentary which explores the issues of menopause through the voices of women, from grassroots in the community to experts in the area of health, media and the arts. It asks the question 'What is menopause and how does it impact on the lives of women in Irish society?' The programme unravels the mysteries and challenges the stigma of this natural inevitable life event by informing listeners of facts, wisdom, coping strategies, and examining how attitudes are changing. Each episode features a participant sharing her life experiences of the menopause, interspersed by the voices of women from St Kieran's Active Retirement group, Tormey Villas Community Centre, Athlone, Co Westmeath; culminating in the finale episode 13, where I facilitated a co-collaborative poetry workshop exploring experience of menopause with the women's group from the Irish Wheelchair Association, Clonbrusk Centre, Athlone (see figure 39 & 40).

Completing the trilogy of radio documentaries, in 2022 Erica produced *Songs of the Goddess*; a 7-part radio documentary featuring my poems, Aine's original compositions in response to my poems; and introduced 7 singers from all over the world who created their own song version of the poems.

Mitchell's (1998) research indicates that 'women's community radio can be a place for individual empowerment, representation and creativity, as well as a space for resistance – including collective and transnational feminist campaigning and activism,' (2016, p.6). Coyle and Follows Smith (2020) posit that community radio acts as an arena for older Irish women's lived experiences, such as menopause; to be represented, empowered, and reflected into the community.



Figure 45: Photo Caroline Coyle (2017) Awakening the Goddess Within Radio Documentary



Figure 46: Caroline Coyle (2022) Songs of the Goddess Within Radio Documentary

The year after the journey in 2019, at the Bealtaine Festival in Uisneach, I, along with Patsy, facilitated a celebration of menopause through ritual. The ceremony, 'Celebrating MnáPause Ritual at Uisneach' provided a space for participants to embrace and celebrate menopause as a natural rhythm of life. It was a multicultural inclusive event, women, of Irish, English, Scottish, German, Indian and Chilean descent, participated in the ceremony. As it was an intergenerational ceremony with mothers, daughters and grandmothers, the ages ranged from thirty to seventy, with most in their fifties. At the celebrating Mnápause (Mná meaning woman in Irish; a term coined by Follows Smith for the radio documentary) Ritual; we began to share our individual experiences of menopause, perimenopause, physical and emotional symptoms, challenges, feelings of freedom, medical and holistic intervention. Participating in this ritual offered an opportunity for the women to become immersed in the mythological landscape of time, space, ritual, and place (see figure 47). Through the collective power of the ritual, a safe space was created by and for the women to share their experiences, pass on knowledge and externalise their embracement of menopause as a natural rhythm of life out into the world. Sharing the women's stories evidenced how collective and intergenerational participatory rituals can act as conduits through which knowledge to navigate the menopause journey can be passed on.



*Figure 47: Photo Denise De Blanca (2019) Menopause Ritual at Uisneach*

In the Geogendered landscape of Uisneach, woman, place, and relationships intersect with land, nature, and the Goddess. You find yourself in an ancient place, in an ancient landscape giving you a unique perspective of a different time, a different world. A landscape which embodies the intersectional feminist values of equality and justice. A landscape retaining the cultural memory of celebrations and rituals that have taken place for thousands of years; honouring nature, the harvest, the seasons, the ancestors and Eríu, the sovereign Goddess of Ireland.

By Triskelic spiralling a portal of awakening space was unlocked, providing access for what became a pilgrimage of transformative self-discovery to the Goddess within. As we participated in the Celtic festivals of the Seasons rituals, the creation of our own multi-layered portal of awakening space became apparent. It was within this space that our experiences of older women ageing in contemporary Ireland were explored, examining how we constructed our identities by utilising poetry (our own and co-constructed communal poetry) to initiate a discourse, to negotiate, reflect, process, and internalise our feelings about our identity.

Journeying to the authentic self during this study, led to an illumination of our heartlight energy as a confidence in our authentic self as older women; a 'coming home' of our Goddess Within. This heartlight energy of imbas is an ancient source of 'knowing' which was always there 'just beneath the surface,' rebirthed through the Communitas of Sisterhood Triskelic journeying through Geogendered landscape.

Findings from this study indicate that this heartlight energy of imbas is non-expendable and can be tapped into as a resource later along life's journey. Moreover, findings indicate that this heartlight energy of imbas ameliorates the social construction of older women in Irish society as invisible and invaluable. The concluding chapter of this thesis, Chapter 7, sets out the major findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research

This thesis set out to explore older women's experience of ageing as it relates to identity. This was explored through three lenses: ageing, identity, and ritual. It was inconceivable to me the depth of exploration that would occur or the outpouring of creative energy that ensued which reflected at an individual and collective level; each woman's Triskele journey to exploration of self. As we walked in our ancestor's footsteps, there was a feeling of ageing in a nonlinear time; of having been there before; experienced before; engaged in meaning making before. In this study, the cultural narrative of reconciliation between age and identity was subsequently corporealised through the women's creation of poetry, art, music, dance, and material culture. These images, texts and songs illustrated the consolidation of that relationship and have forged a pathway into the local community, travelled nationally and internationally through art collaborations, radio and film documentaries.

This study's first objective set out to explore older women's lived experiences of ageing in Ireland. Findings indicated that stepping outside the socially constructed world of what it means to be an older woman in contemporary Ireland and being provided with time to critically reflect enabled us to explore, negotiate, reflect, and internalise how we felt about their own sense of identity as older women in contemporary Ireland.

The juxtaposition of feeling arrived as we become older, disrupts the societal norms of older women's invisibility. My study evidences this divergence and its implications for future policy. Findings from this study concur with international research that older women feel invisible in society. However, this study concluded that the disruption and creativity introduced through participative ritual through Geogendered landscape provided a springboard to personal transformative sovereignty. Role models of older with agency in society hold the potential to inspire younger women to view ageing; and ageing bodies; as part the natural cycle of life.

Stepping off the edge into this journey, I could not have comprehended the extent of the self-developmental pilgrimage that I would have to undertake, to awaken, explore, negotiate, and renegotiate how I felt about my identity as an ageing woman in contemporary Ireland. I was cognisant that the sacred, safe, Geogendered space had the capacity to provide a contextual theatre; in which I and the other women could explore and perform our identity as ageing women. I was confident of my abilities to facilitate and

hold the emotions in that space of negotiation. However, I could not have envisaged how I travelled, physically and metaphorically; balancing the complexities of travelling backwards and forwards in time; against the backdrop of our past as women in Celtic, Catholic, colonial, and postcolonial Ireland. I travelled across a layered terrain of historical, mythological, cultural, religious, political, spiritual, ritualistic, and philosophical dimensions to disrupt the hegemonic social construction of older women in Irish society. This became, for me and for the other women, as the findings have indicated, an intensive self-transformative reset of our identity as older women in contemporary Ireland.

The second objective was to examine how we felt about their identity as older women. As we journeyed deep within ourselves, reflecting on our ageing and lived experiences as older women; layers of living and performing through patriarchy and postcolonial misogyny began to unravel; opening a chink to the sublimely passing on and inheritance of Irish intergenerational female trauma. Participant observations throughout the rituals of the Seasons included Sharon's first time to read a poem in front of others at Bealtaine in 2017; Tina's jumping up on the rock and screaming from the bottom of her soul at Lughnasadh in 2017 initiating the start of the transformation stage; and Ursula holding court at the Winter Solstice. These happenings indicated that the women had taken on the mythological mantle, and I had watched them grow in this self-confidence and share how they felt about their identity as an older woman.

The final objective was to investigate older women's participation in ritual. The rituals served as a portal of awakening space for each woman and offered a safe sanctuary from which identity could be explored and understood. As we journeyed, a *Communitas* of Sisterhood developed; within which; we began to negotiate and renegotiate our authentic self. Furthermore, in looking at ways in how older women can perform ageing, Anne Webster Wright cited in O'Neill and Schrage-Fruh (2019) highlighted dance as her 'newly found creative agency,' (p.4), suggesting that older women can challenge the dominant narrative of negative cultural stereotypes by 'restorying,' reinventing through performance such as dance. Utilising the metaphor of accessing the Otherworld to harness the Divine Feminine empowerment of the Goddess Ériu; participated in the rituals honouring the Goddess Ériu precipitated an unleashing of creative energy which we translated to various

expressive forms of dance, music, poetry, chants, painting, and craft making. Collaborative poetry making and ritual is an effective way to look at older women' ageing.

As we moved from Bealtaine to Lughnasadh, and onto Samhain, the powerful creative and therapeutic medium of music, singing, chanting and dance became an integral part of the festivals rituals and of how we examined our individual and collective identity.

Music, whether one plays, listens to, moves, and dances to, induces feelings of euphoria. Throughout the journey, the context of music and dance we experienced became integral to the *communitas*. Shared feelings acknowledged that it was a liberating experience to dance with other women, women who may not have had the opportunity to dance with other women since adolescence. Also, that spaces in society for women to come together with the prime objective of dancing tended to focus on exercise only. In concurrence with Moe's (2012) study of belly dancing and its themes of healing, sisterhood, spirituality, and empowerment; findings from this study indicated that in coming together in communal meditative dance; an opportunity opened for us to perform as 'ageing women'. Dance offered a medium through which we could perform our feelings of identity as older woman. It was in each of these ritualistic acts that we connected with; and examined how we felt about our identity as older women.

Reflecting on this study, Triskelic Journeying Model in Geogendered landscape offers a defined model for supporting transformation at an individual and societal level. This model can operate as a transferable model using the third wave feminist intersectional lens, on multiple contexts against different historical, socio cultural, religious, and legislative contexts. As evidenced, the model fostered a sense of sisterhood and *communitas*. It is acknowledged that the model developed within this study will need to be rigorised. Therefore, for the Triskelic Journeying Model to achieve its applied potential; the model will need to move from an academic model to being understood by policy makers. It is recommended that policymakers across intersectional factors which impact ageing; including health, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation; take into consideration the benefits of this model. Beyond Health, Economic and Social care Departments; this model has the potential to be utilised in support of Government bodies as far ranging as Justice, Immigration, Education, and Humanities (see below for implications and recommendations for further research).



## 7.1 Implications and Recommendations for further research

This thesis concludes with eight key recommendations for further research. First, Triskelic journeying in Geogendered landscapes is a powerful participative model to explore older women's perceptions of ageing and identity. It is recommended for use as a transferable model with which to explore ageing and identity, across intersections and other groups, in national and international contexts.

Second, this research found that the juxtaposition of older women feeling 'arrived' or 'becoming' or having 'awakened the Goddess within' has the potential to disrupt the societal norms of older women's invisibility. This study could therefore be extended to evidence this phenomenon and its implications for future policy.

Third, celebrating rituals as rites of passage for menopause has the potential to be beneficial for the holistic health of women, while also infiltrating and disrupting the social construction of what it means to be an older woman in Irish society. Further research might explore rituals as rites of passage in relation to menopause.

Fourth, and from a policy making level, this research suggests that policy makers might apply a third wave feminist intersectional lens to help ageing women to be seen, heard and have agency as valued members of and contributors to society.

Fifth, as this study explored the experiences of a small number of migrant Irish women, it is recommended that further large-scale research be conducted with migrant Irish women in relation to their lived experiences of ageing and identity to further develop findings in this area.

Sixth, in terms of employment and academia in Ireland; an awareness, training and promotion of gender equality; in the form of leadership roles for older women is recommended to be promoted through a feminist intersectional lens, for the concept of intergenerational transmission of gendered expectations to be challenged.

Seventh, Understanding the socio-cultural constructs of older women's identity is a key challenge faced by policy makers in Ireland given that the discourse currently centres on the exploration of a whole Island identity. It is recommended that policy makers adopt a

research position to understand this phenomenon and generate an evidence-informed approach to policy formation.

Finally, findings from this study indicate that the social construction of older women's identity in postcolonial Ireland has led to feelings of invisibility and a loss of identity. Further research could compare divergence in findings of a similar cohort of older women in Northern Ireland for cross border identity. The transformational value of this research model lies in its application as a tool for the integration of people across multiple geopolitical and societal groupings.

As older women, we embraced our role and position in our community and wider society. This has enabled us to work together as a *Communitas of Sisterhood* in various collaborative art-based projects. As the cycles of life continue, we are inextricably linked to each other in ritual, to the land, to our ancestors and to all the women that came before us. While the study has ended, my journey continues, and I intend to devote my life exploring older women's identity in society.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Informed Consent

#### Consent Form

**Title of Research Study:** Awakening the Goddess Within:

An Autoethnographic and Poetic Inquiry into Older Women's experience of Ageing and Identity in Ireland

**Researcher Name:** Caroline Coyle, Tel: 0851084682

**Name of Supervisors:** Professor Ros Jennings, Professor of Ageing, Culture and Media, University Head of Postgraduate Research, Director of the Centre for Women, Ageing and Media Research Centre (WAM), University of Gloucestershire. Tel: 044(0)12242715002

Dr. Hannah Grist, Researcher at the Centre for Women, Ageing and Media (WAM) at the University of Gloucestershire, and co-editor of the Postgraduate Journal of Women, Ageing and Media, Art and Technology Faculty Member, University of Gloucestershire. Tel: 044(0) 01242 715333

This study will use a co constructive poetic inquiry to explore older women's experiences of ageing and identity in contemporary Irish society through their participation in the celebration of the Celtic Festivals of the Seasons; Lughnasadh, Samhain, the Winter Solstice, Imbolc and Bealtaine, at the Hill of Uisneach, the mythological centre of ancient Ireland.

If you agree to participate in this research project, you will take part in semi structured interviews and poetry journaling over the course of the five Celtic Festivals.

The information gathered will be used by the researcher for the purposes of completing her PhD dissertation. All participants have been informed however, that they can withdraw from this research project at any stage until the process of writing up has begun. The data will be stored on password protected documents and hard copies of information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

Due to the creative nature of this project, proposed participants have already indicated that they would not want to be made anonymous in the thesis and would like to be associated with their poetry.

I agree to participate in the study as outlined above

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix 2: Table 1 List of Participants and Festivals Attended

Participant		Festivals Attended							No of Events
		Bealtaine 2017	Lughnasadh 2017	Samhain 2017	Winter Solstice 2017	Imbolc 2018	Bealtaine 2018		
1	Amy	Yes	Yes				Poem	2	
2	Sadhbh	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6	
3	Maria	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	5	
4	Bridie		Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	4	
5	Tina	Poemart	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	4	
6	Anne	Yes						1	
7	Ruth	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6	
8	Rosemarie	Poemart	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	
9	Ursula	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Poem	4	
10	Mary				Yes	Yes	Yes	3	
11	Chris				Yes			1	
12	Nicole	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6	
13	Sharon	Yes			Poem		Yes	2	
14	Erica	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6	
15	Dee			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	4	
16	Patricia					Yes		1	
17	Aine	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6	
18	Patsy		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	
19	Janice	Yes		Yes		Poem		2	
20	Paula	Yes	Yes	Poem	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	
21	Caroline	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6	





Appendix 3: Festivals, Rituals and Facilitators

<b>Bealtaine May 2017</b>	<b>Royal Palace</b>	<b>Royal Palace</b>	<b>Amphitheatre</b>	<b>Visitors Centre</b>	<b>Bealtaine Fire Festival</b>
	Caroline introduced the beginning of the Journey the 'Stepping Off the Edge' Honouring the Goddess Ériu Ritual. Ruth gave a talk on the mythology of Bealtaine and the Goddess Ériu	We read our Poetry reflections in response to 'How do I feel as an older Woman?' Poemart shown. Aine played her original composition to Caroline's poem 'Ériu Illuminat'	Caroline facilitated the collaborative Poetry Workshop. We all participated in the creation and performance of the Communal Poem	Sharing of food, discussion, and music.	We joined in the Festival of the Fires Procession leading up the Hill to light the Fire
<b>Lughnasadh 31<sup>st</sup> July - 1<sup>st</sup> Aug 2017</b>	<b>Lough Lugh</b>	<b>Lough Lugh</b>	<b>Lough Lugh Immersion</b>	<b>Visitors Centre</b>	<b>Visitors Centre</b>
	Caroline introduced the Lughnasadh Ritual, giving guidance as to how the Immersion ritual at Lough Lugh would happen. Ruth gave a talk on the mythology surrounding Lughnasadh	We read our Poetry Reflections beside Lough Lugh, we participated in music, singing, chants (Aine, Bridie, Caroline) Tina showed her Painting of the Emergence of the Goddess	We immersed into Lough Lugh, holding hands and chanting, 'Immerse Yourself, Embrace Ériu, Honour the Goddess at Lough Lugh (Chant -Bridie and Caroline)	Caroline facilitated the collaborative poetry workshop. Tina shared gifts of small acrylic paintings for all	We participated in the creation and performance of the Communal Poem Sharing of food discussion and music
<b>Samhain Oct 31<sup>st</sup> - 1<sup>st</sup> Nov 2017</b>	<b>At the entrance to Uisneach</b>	<b>Up the Hill to Ail na Mireann</b>	<b>Ail na Mireann.</b>	<b>Amphitheatre</b>	<b>Hill of Uisneach</b>

	<p>Caroline introduced the Honouring the Ancestors Full Moon Ritual at the base of Uisneach</p> <p>Ruth gave a talk on the mythology surrounding Samhain</p>	<p>Tina had gifted each of us Painted Triskelion Stones to carry up to the Catstone, 'Carry me with you in the Stones.' We walked up the Hill to Ail na Mireann. The Catstone Stone of Divisions</p>	<p>At Ail na Mireann, the Catstone, Patsy led us in Blessings around the Stone. We participated in poetry reflections. We joined in with the singing, chants facilitated by Patsy and Aine.</p>	<p>In the Amphitheatre Janice facilitated a Meditative Circle Life Dance accompanied by Aine on violin. Maria facilitated a Burning Intention Workshop. Caroline facilitated the co collaborative poetry workshop. All participated in the creation and performance of Communal Poem</p>	<p>On the Hill of Uisneach, Patsy facilitated the Full Moon ceremony Honouring the Ancestors and those who have passed.</p> <p>As we finished, a huge Full Moon rose from behind the Hill. A magnificent backdrop to the day.</p>
<p><b>Winter Solstice</b> <b>21<sup>st</sup> Dec 2017</b></p>	<p><b>Hill of Uisneach</b></p> <p>Caroline introduced the Celebrating the Winter Solstice Ritual</p> <p>Ruth gave a talk on the mythology surrounding the Winter Solstice</p>	<p><b>Royal Palace</b></p> <p>We joined the Druids, who were cooking on an open fire. They joined with us in the poetry reflections, collaborating with the music. We all shared food.</p>	<p><b>Royal Palace</b></p> <p>Caroline facilitated the co collaborative poetry workshop</p> <p>All participated in the creation and performance of the Communal Poem</p>		

<b>Imbolc Feb 1<sup>st</sup> 2018</b>	<b>St Brigid's Well, Killare</b>	<b>St Brigid's Well, Killare</b>	<b>Visitors Centre</b>	<b>Visitor's Centre</b>	<b>Visitor's Centre</b>
	Caroline introduced the Honouring the Goddess Brigid Ritual at the Well. Ruth gave a talk on the mythology surrounding the Goddess Brigid and Imbolc.	We read our Poetry Reflections at the Well. Aine accompanied on the violin. Ursula beat the bodhrán	Ursula facilitated a workshop making Brigid's Crosses. From reeds gathered the night before, we made our Brigid's cross.	Caroline facilitated the collaborative poetry workshop. All participated in the creation and performance of the Communal Poem	Sharing of food discussion and music
<b>Bealtaine May 2018</b>	<b>Hill of Uisneach</b>	<b>Hill of Uisneach</b>	<b>Hill of Uisneach</b>	<b>Festival of Fires</b>	
	We gathered on the Hill at the Festival of the Fires. Caroline introduced the closing of our journey with the words 'Nothing ever ends on Uisneach, it only begins.'	All participated in the poetry Performance. Music (Aine)	Each participant was gifted with a Triskelion pendant made by Rosemarie.	Participants then joined in the Festival of Fires procession up the Hill to light the Bealtaine Fire	

**Table 2: Festivals, Rituals and Facilitator**

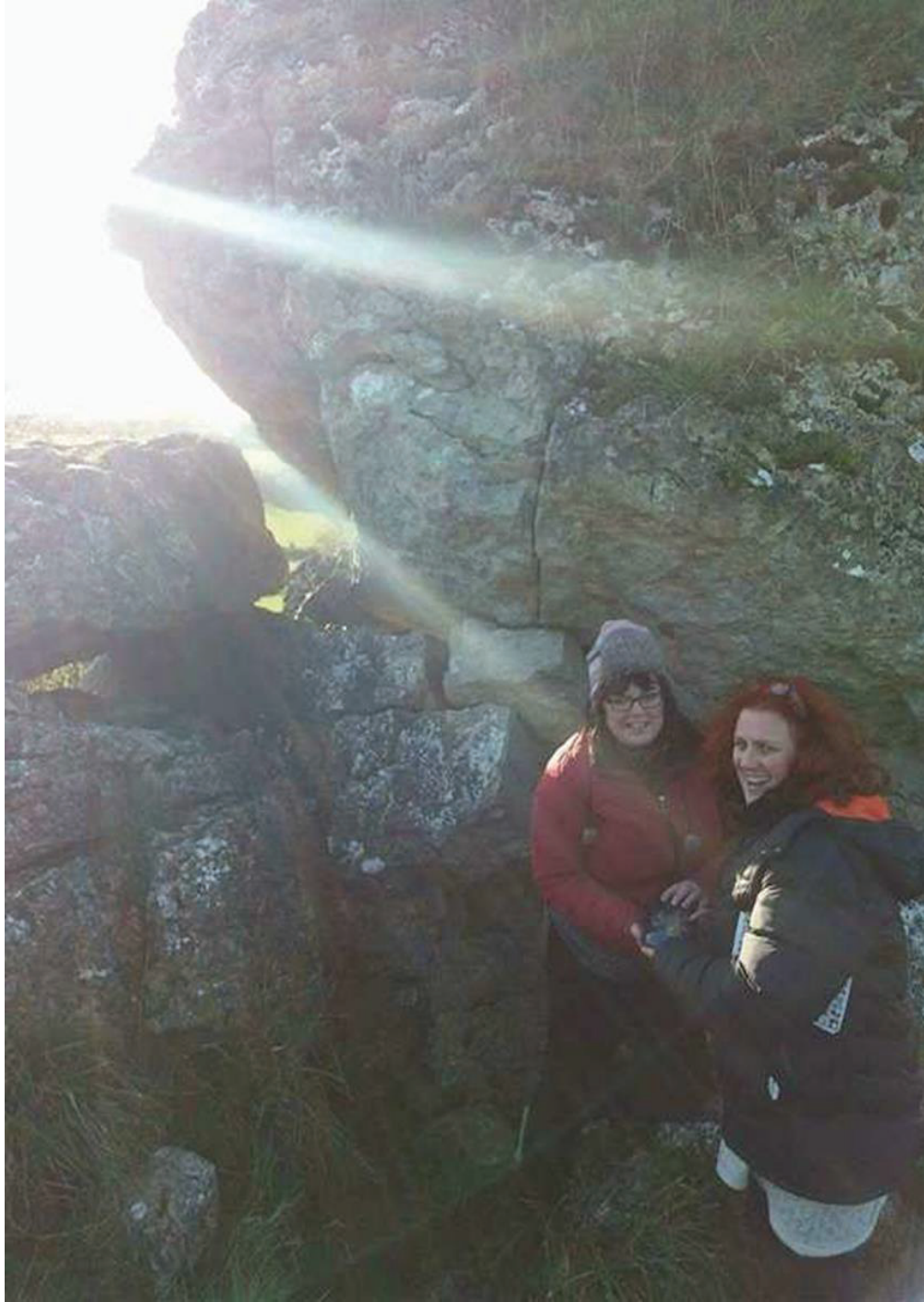
Appendix 4: Additional Photographs



Figure 48: Photo Caroline Coyle (2017) Ail na Mireann, The Catstone, Stone of Divisions, at Uisneach



Figure 49: Photo Caroline Coyle (2017) Following in the footsteps of the last High King of Ireland - (Ruairi O'Connor), 1000 years later; Ireland's President Michael D Higgins leads the procession to light the fire at Samhain



*Figure 50: Photo Erica Follows Smith (2017) Samhain Caroline and Maria with Tina's Stone Ail na Mireann*



Figure 51: Photo Erica Follows Smith (2018) Spilling over into the inBetween Making collaborative art at Tina's Acrylic Art workshop



Figure 52: Photo Ursula Ledwith (2018) Caroline's self-portrait in Tina's tiled Mirror



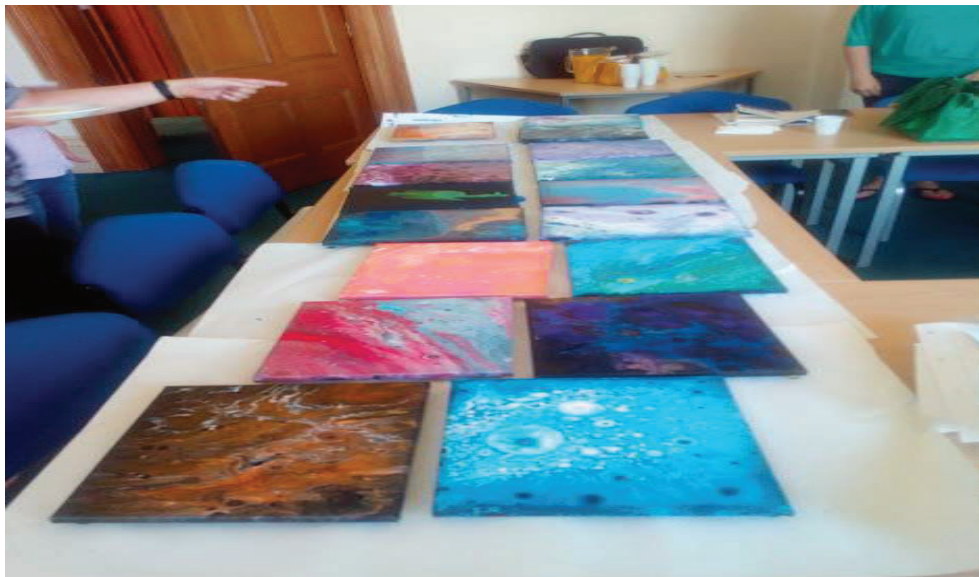
*Figure 53: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Tina in her workshop*



*Figure 54: Photo Bridie Breen (2018) Making art in Tina's*



*Figure 55: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Having fun at Tina's Acrylic Pour Workshop*



*Figure 56: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) 'Woman, Art and Water: Poetry through Pour' A collaborative workshop by artist Tina Elliffe and poet Caroline Coyle at the Women Ageing and Media WAM Summer School 2018*





*Figure 57: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) Bealtaine - Aine with women on horseback*



*Figure 58: Photo Erica Follows Smith (2018) Bianca joined us at Bealtaine 2018 to sang Ériu for the first time*



*Figure 59: Photo Caroline Coyle (2023) Triskelion pendant made by Rosemarie for the women at Bealtaine 2018*



Figure 60: Photo Caroline Coyle (2018) *Awakening the Goddess Within* Documentary (E. 1-6) Athlone Community Radio



[Awakening the Goddess Within](#)



*Figure 61: Photo Catherine Sheridan (2018) Caroline Coyle and Patsy Preston at the Tain March*



Figure 62: Photo Imelda Rea (2019) Drumming at Bealtaine Festival

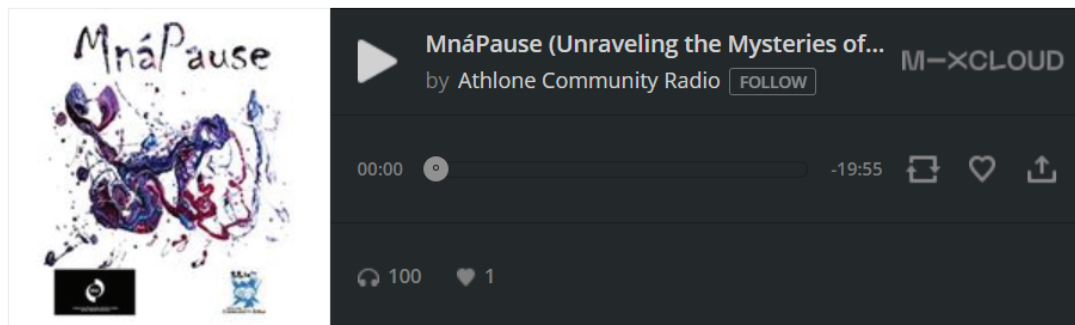


Figure 63: Photo Caroline Coyle (2020) Mnapause (Menopause) Documentary (E. 1-13) Athlone Community Radio



*Figure 64: Photo John Madden (2019) Linking Hands Across the Bridge to celebrate the Goddess Sinnan- A Collaborative Community Arts Performance August 5th2019*



*Figure 65: Photo John Madden (2019) Linking Hands Across the Bridge to celebrate the Goddess Sinnan – Members of the community celebrate Sinnan through music, chants and dance*



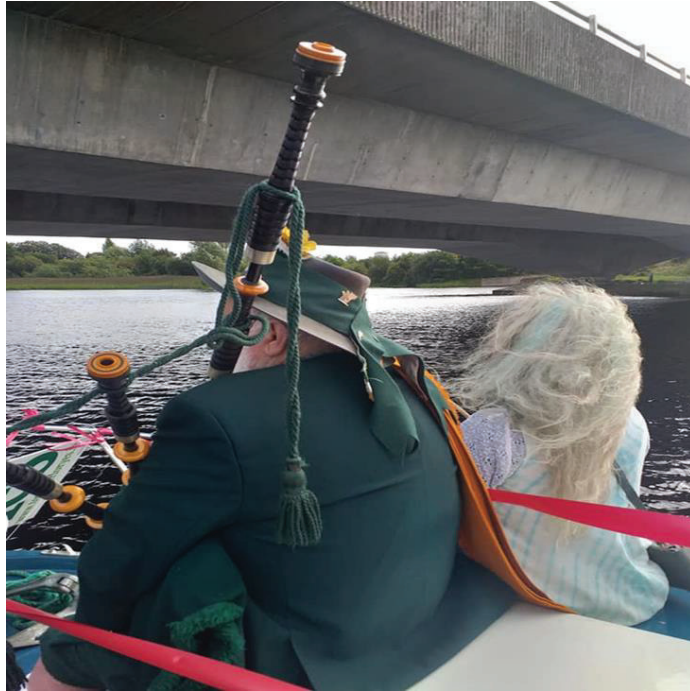
*Figure 66: Photo BoxFox (2019) Linking Hands Across the Bridge to celebrate the Goddess Sinnan- From the Otherworld, Sinnan inspires us to seek the knowledge within ourselves, remaining true to Nature and connecting with each other.*



*Figure 67: Photo Jenn Cronin (2019) Shout out for Sinnan – Second Community Collaborative Art Performance*



*Figure 68: Photo Jenn Cronin (2019) Shout out for Sinnan – sailing under Athlone's three bridges representing past, present and future, journey to the Otherworld.*



*Figure 69: Photo Caroline Coyle (2019) Shout out for Sinnan – Uilleann Piper and Sinnan sail under Cumann na mBan Bridge (Women’s Council Bridge)*



*Figure 70: Photo Dean Carroll (2019) Shout out for Sinnan – Community Art Performance*





*Figure 71: Photo Caroline Coyle (2022) Eco Spiritual Community Mandela Workshop facilitated at Ériu by Caroline Coyle and Delores Crerar, Bealtaine 2022*



*Figure 72: Photo Melanie Lynch (2022) Reunion of the Goddesses at Bealtaine 2022*

ÉRIU Illuminat  
CAROLINE COYLE AINE O'REGAN

Episode 1 - Ériu Illuminat featuring Bianca Fachel  
Episode 2 - Immersed in Lough Lugh featuring Amanda McCallan  
Episode 3 - Under the Track of the Children of Uisneach  
Crossover to the Otherworld) featuring Susanne Wunsch  
Episode 4 - Winter Solstice Light featuring Ciara Moran  
Episode 5 - Brigid, Goddess of Light featuring Ann Gaffney  
Episode 6 - I Have Become My Own Journey featuring Aoia Garman  
Episode 7 - Chants featuring Patsy Preston and voices of past and present Goddesses!

Om - phalos Mother of Mi -

Producer and Editor - Erica Follows - Smith  
Presenter - Caroline Coyle  
Researcher - Aine O'Regan  
Sound Production - Kyle McCallan  
Artwork - Frank Sammon

And Special Thanks to Jonathan Callaghan at Swell Audio and to Uisneach

Songs of the Goddess Within

LYRICS:  
CAROLINE COYLE ÉRIU Illuminat AINE O'REGAN

Ei - Ru, Ei - Ru Ea - rth Go - ddes is re - ver far a - way.  
She lies be - neath the surface, in this old bight of hang - ing moon  
At - fill na Mi - leam She rests, Um - li - cas - Hi - ber ni - ae,  
Om - phalos Mother of Mi -  
Ei - Ru, We call you from  
O - pen your arms to the Wo - men of Ire - land, We are co - ming ho

88.4  
Athlone Community Radio

BAI  
Bairnéir na hÉireann

Figure 73: Photo Erica Follows Smith (2023) Songs of the Goddess Within Documentary (Episodes 1-6) Athlone Community Radio.



*Figure 74: Photo Caroline Coyle (2023) Goddess Ériu on the first national holiday of St Brigid*

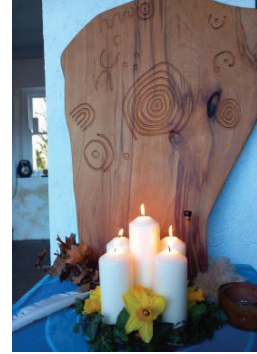


Figure 75: Photos Gobnait Cronin Wright (2023) Imbolc - Songs of the Goddess celebrating the first national holiday of Brigid



*Figure 76: Photo Suzanne Wunsch (2023) Imbolc - Celebrating Brigid's Day*



*Figure 77: Photo Gobnait Cronin Wright (2023) 1st Brigid's Day - Caroline and Patsy, Sun setting at Uisneach*



Figure 78: Photos Joanne Ní Thuathaigh (2023) *Bealtaine 2023 - Poetry Performance Awakening the Goddess*



Figure 79: Photo Kara Richards (2023) *Bean Feasa- Immersed in Boggy Waters Song Bean Feasa, Immersed in boggy waters, by Caroline Coyle*



Figure 80: Photo Caroline Coyle (2023) Geogendered Landscape Ritual Communitas Self