

# ‘Circles of Women’: Feminist Movements in the Choreography of Oona Doherty<sup>1</sup>

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*The focus of this article is the range of feminisms which circulate through Belfast-based Oona Doherty’s choreographies for groups of women, namely the second episode of *Hard to Be Soft: A Belfast Prayer* (2017), which is titled ‘Sugar Army’, and *Lady Magma: The Birth of a Cult* (2019). This analysis is motivated by the need to expand discussion of feminisms in tandem with examination of more complex identities in Northern Ireland: to look beyond a Nationalist–Unionist binary within post-conflict society and examine the intersections of gender, class and race. Tracking the movement of feminisms through Doherty’s choreographies will explore how they mobilize, and fail, these women, as well as revealing the potential for, and pitfalls of, community and solidarity. Doherty’s work has the potential to mobilize a dynamic intergenerational and intersectional feminism which recognizes the experiences of ‘differently positioned women’.*

Belfast-based choreographer and dancer Oona Doherty describes the oppressive qualities of embodied memories: ‘I think a whole generation of People here [in Belfast] are holding an era in their bones, in muscle memory, in tissue. It can seep out in the bar into their kinesphere and into others. A society aura that is holding. Holding ... Stuff.’<sup>2</sup> These memories speak to the legacy of a period of armed conflict, euphemistically known as the Troubles (1968–98). However, they also speak to experiences that are silenced as a result of the dominance of the sectarian divide in politics and culture in Northern Ireland (and its analysis) which has sidelined exploration of more complex identities. Theresa O’Keefe has described how, during the Troubles, mainstream feminism avoided division by adopting a ‘lowest-common-denominator’ approach which required that women ‘check their label at the door’ and ‘assumed that using gender as the only analytical category to set core principles would be productive for fostering cross-community dialogue and building a broad-based movement’.<sup>3</sup> The focus of this article is the range of feminisms which circulate through Oona Doherty’s choreographies for groups of women, namely the second episode of *Hard to Be Soft: A Belfast Prayer* (2017),<sup>4</sup> which is titled ‘Sugar Army’, and *Lady Magma: The Birth of a Cult* (2019).<sup>5</sup> This analysis is motivated by the need to expand discussion of feminisms in tandem with examination of more complex identities within a post-conflict society. For, as Eilish Rooney asserts, ‘Representative democracy, politics and gender in the north of Ireland

are enmeshed within the hierarchies of power and inequality, which are differently experienced and differently understood by differently positioned women'.<sup>6</sup>

Northern Ireland is a society defined by strong churchgoing traditions, Catholic and Protestant, and shaped by the legacy of moral conservatism. In recent years, Brexit has drawn attention to Northern Ireland's masculinist political culture and its resistance to same-sex marriage and reproductive rights (afforded to the rest of the UK and Ireland).<sup>7</sup> Regressive myths of femininity, the 'angel in the home' and the idealized mother, pervade both Catholic and Protestant traditions of normative femininities. These are represented in the figures of the Virgin Mary within the nationalist community and the Loyal Ulsterwoman among the unionist community; these figures overlap through the emphasis on loyalty and subservience to men, and on woman's place in the home. These idealized femininities have at times been violently enforced and the term 'armed patriarchy' conveys how sectarian violence permeates private and domestic spaces.<sup>8</sup> Northern Ireland has high levels of domestic and sexual violence.<sup>9</sup> However, as O'Keefe argues, address of these issues through a lowest-common-denominator feminist politics has been at the expense of an inclusive, intersectional feminism. In the period since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998), O'Keefe notes 'the importance of a vibrant grassroots, intersectional feminist movement for effecting egalitarian social change'.<sup>10</sup> I argue that engagement with identity beyond a singular focus on one analytical category (be it race, gender, or class), or indeed a binary, underpins Doherty's choreography.

Doherty's work has garnered international acclaim and in 2021, just five years after her first major work, she was awarded the Venice Biennale Danza Silver Lion. Doherty trained professionally at London Contemporary Dance School, the University of Ulster, and Trinity Laban. She has worked with companies including TRASH (Netherlands), Emma Martin/United Fall (Ireland) and La Horde (France). Doherty's dance theatre draws on an array of sources from classical music to popular culture, and within the context of Northern Ireland this serves to broaden notions of identity and community. Struggle, transformation and rebirth are central to Doherty's body of work. Her eclectic approach enables her to explore gritty realities while simultaneously rooting the work in the joyful and spiritual. One of the sources for the set of *Hard to Be Soft* was the oppressive omnipresence of the monolith in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. This was stunningly realized through the combination of Ciaran Bagnall's set design, a sparse cubic space enclosed by the vertical rhythm of silver bars, and David Holmes's soundtrack. Doherty is clear that she wanted 'the set to be overbearing to the dancers, something they would have to fight against. I wanted the sound to be the set, the bright white light to scream'.<sup>11</sup> The second episode of this 'dance prayer', titled 'Sugar Army', sheds an unflinching light on the experiences and corpo-realities of a fierce band of teenage girls. Religion polices tightly circumscribed roles with regard to gender and sexuality, and this is captured in the spatial limits of the set for *Hard to Be Soft* as cage and cathedral. Add to the mix the ways in which women are subject to pressure and discipline through new forms of media and technology, and we can start to examine the world that the Sugar Army navigates through their hip-hop-inspired choreography. In her next

work, *Lady Magma: The Birth of a Cult* (2019), Doherty gathers a group of more mature women. The retro design and music return us to the 1970s and to a feminism which celebrates female embodiment and desire: this cult is dedicated to 'the liberation of the howl'.<sup>12</sup>

Discussion of the sociopolitical contexts that these 'differently positioned women' are operating within is key to my examination of the complexity of identity and the feminisms in Doherty's work. Tracking the movement of feminisms through Doherty's choreographies for groups of women will explore how they mobilize, and fail, these women, as well as revealing the potential for, and pitfalls of, community and solidarity. Analysis of Doherty's work will necessarily engage with her implicit address of generations of feminist thought as she probes the possibilities for an intersectional and inclusive feminism, as well as acknowledging the impediments to realizing this approach. My analysis is based on my attendance at performances of *Hard to Be Soft: A Belfast Prayer* (Abbey Theatre, Dublin, May 2018, with the Belfast cast of the Sugar Army) and the Belfast premiere of *Lady Magma* (MAC, October 2019), as well as viewing recordings of both shows (I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to Oona Doherty for making these available to me).

### **'Glamorous individuality' and postfeminism in 'Sugar Army'**

The Sugar Army have grown up post-Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and come of age in an era of austerity politics. In her last article, murdered journalist Lyra McKee explained,

The story of how my generation got fucked over was a different one ... Peace, we were assured, would bring a thriving new economy. It never appeared. It didn't matter what qualifications you had, the most plentiful work was to be found in call centres, answering or making calls for a minimum wage.<sup>13</sup>

The uneven effects of a peace dividend are highlighted by the narration which opens the 'Sugar Army' episode. In contrast to the 'bright white limbo' which unfolds in the first episode of *Hard to Be Soft*, the second episode opens with the stage in darkness, focusing our attention on the voice of a young woman:

I think this specific place, this little bubble that has tragedy in the walls, it's like the politics of our comfort, the politics of our comfort of staying somewhere and we dress it up with glamour because we have to make light of tragedy.

We feel the enclosed nature of 'this little bubble' as the retinal imprint of the vertical bars of the set resonates with these words. The claustrophobia is augmented by references to how tragedy structures the space; it is in its very walls. The deployment of tragedy as a dramatic form to represent the conflict in Northern Ireland is a familiar trope and one that has been criticized for reinforcing a sense of predestination and inescapability.<sup>14</sup> However, in the 'Sugar Army' episode it alludes to experiences beyond nationalist-unionist identity and addresses young women's experiences. As the young woman describes, 'there's no jobs and there's this and that and all your friends are pregnant and some friends are leaving for Australia and you're jealous but you don't actually

have the guts to do it yourself. The sense of imprisonment and the lack of opportunity results in their need to 'dress it up with glamour' and the voice-over's focus on the need to 'put on a good face' and 'look fuckin' amazing' reveals how postfeminism shores up their 'bubble'.

I refer to Angela McRobbie's formulation of postfeminism whereby elements of feminism 'have been taken into account' and 'repudiated'.<sup>15</sup> McRobbie draws attention to the ways in which feminist ideas of 'empowerment' and 'choice' have been deployed in a much more individualistic discourse – a redeployment that serves to offer neo-liberal ideas as a substitute for feminism. Anita Harris points to the ways in which 'young women [in the twenty first century] are imagined as ideal subjects for the new socioeconomic order' and that 'success is depicted as a consequence of individual self-invention and good choices'.<sup>16</sup> The voiceover in 'Sugar Army' appears to promote individual, rather than structural, change that can be achieved through a particular performance of femininity. The illusionary promise of social mobility is bound up in the *faux* feminism of the 'active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism'.<sup>17</sup> As the young woman in *Hard to Be Soft* claims, 'you get really dressed up and you make a name for yourself by being really fashionable and you put on the face of success and sometimes you can blag your way and then get like better job opportunities'. McRobbie makes clear the intersection of class and gender in this paradigm:

Working-class women and lower middle-class women, who once tried to achieve simply 'respectability', as Skeggs (1997) argued, as a class-appropriate habitus of femininity, a solution to the tyranny of imposed yet unachievable norms of femininity, which eluded them and made them feel ashamed, are now urged ... to aspire to 'glamorous individuality'.<sup>18</sup>

The vocabulary and new 'spaces of attention' proffered by postfeminism circulate through the 'Sugar Army' voice-over, to reveal how women 'move out of the shadows, into a spotlight of visibility', in exchange for 'a specific form of freedom and a particular idea of independence'.<sup>19</sup>

However, the 'tragedy' arguably lies in the false promise of postfeminism which excludes working-class women. The final lines of the voice-over draw our attention to the response of the young women to the monolithic presence of these new forms of female confinement, where 'they're superstars in this granite-like stagnancy'. The voice-over also introduces the potential for battle and resistance: 'And they're superstars like just for putting on their armour and getting on with the day.' As the lights come up on the Sugar Army in this 'bright white limbo', this is not the softened Deleuzian luminosity of the 'spaces of attention' which McRobbie argues disguises regulative dynamics. Instead, we see the army assembled in stark relief. They (metaphorically) put on their armour to reject a classed and gendered respectability politics, 'glamorous individuality' and inescapable tragedy. In the dance that follows, Doherty makes visible a feminism which defies classed gender expectations and counters a postfeminist girl power that can be bought to achieve 'the face of success'.

### 'Put on a good face'

The strength of the Sugar Army derives from a feminism that does not strive for likeability and respectability, an unobliging feminism which critiques the structures, and feminisms, which exclude them. Doherty takes inspiration from a range of influences in the 'Sugar Army' episode, including hip-hop culture. The Sugar Army's uniform, which comprises white skinny jeans and tracksuit tops in an array of colours, incorporates hip-hop influences with an edge of classed street glamour. Doherty worked with an existing world champion group routine from East Belfast's Ajendance Crew, choreographed by Annika Graham, and added moments of theatre before re-choreographing it to David Holmes's music. However, the original high-octane hip-hop routine explores a different affective terrain in Doherty's iteration which is supported by Holmes's soundtrack. Throughout the episode, the bare, throbbing bass is in tandem with jarring metallic guitar sounds; this is then punctuated by moments of release characterized by soaring strings. These instances of relief are accompanied by swooning, ethereal feminine vocals generating a sense of yearning. The effect is a moody industrial soundscape with a nod to post-punk aural sensibilities. Holmes's music lends itself to an exploration of the tensions created by frustration in the freedom to affect a range of expression and emotions: a straining for articulation.

Doherty's exploration of an alternative affective topography which resists normative gendered affects is invigorated by engagement with the haka, a Maori ceremonial dance. Doherty decontextualizes the dance from its origins to focus on the tradition's utilization of facial contortions. The dancers were urged to draw on this in an effort to 'counteract the "Instagram disease" young girls are faced with, where the body image is so distorted any emotion is numbed'.<sup>20</sup> Some of the movements of the haka are seamlessly incorporated into the choreography, for example stamping their feet and hitting their chests as they face the audience in a V formation. The expressive nature of this confrontational movement resonates with the facial opposition to the emotional range of a respectable femininity or 'glamorous individuality'. Gill describes the affective regulation of postfeminism and the pressure 'to perform a particular kind of upbeat and resilient selfhood – to be "gleaming" and "dazzling", no matter how they may actually feel'.<sup>21</sup> In one instance, the group form a line and interlink their arms as they rise on their toes and move forward as a corps de ballet; they are *en demi-pointe* with their hands held down and palms facing forward, like gliding statues of the Virgin Mary. This more traditional image of idealized femininity puts another spin on 'dazzling' as connoting purity and virginity; moreover, a classed commentary is folded in with the deployment of ballet to evoke the purity of these 'traditional' femininities in contrast to the hip-hop routine.

Counter to performances of 'little angels'<sup>22</sup> and the religious and classed overtones of what is required of a 'good girl' is the affect generated through the Sugar Army's movement and facial expression. The unnerving ambience of the music facilitates moments which interrupt the 'upbeat' choreography of the world champion dance routine, moments in which the young women are not choreographed and, as Doherty notes, they revert to either intense performance poses or look lost and vulnerable.<sup>23</sup>

These performance poses default to a hypersexualized, commodifiable femininity which both draws on 'glamorous individuality' and refuses expectations of a 'good girl'. In contrast are the moments interspersed through the routine where the Sugar Army fix their hair and awkwardly adjust their jeans, revealing their efforts and failures to maintain a polished performance. The need to 'put on a good face' mentioned throughout the introductory voice-over takes on a new meaning: war paint that eschews the visibility of a 'glamorous individuality' and idealized feminine tropes, and instead celebrates marginalized femininities.

In 'Sugar Army', the expressive nature of the haka functions simultaneously as a war dance battling the 'Instagram disease' and a celebration of unruly feminist affect to counter how 'women must disavow – or at least render palatable – a whole range of experiences and emotions – notably insecurity, anger and complaint'.<sup>24</sup> This affective terrain also draws from another of Doherty's influences: the research frame that she explores with the Sugar Army at each new tour location is that of a 'strong female performer'. Doherty showed the Belfast Sugar Army footage of the dancer Jaja Vankova who shot to fame in the American television show *So You Think You Can Dance*. Jaja performs krump, a freestyle street dance with its origins in south Los Angeles. Krump is an expressive style conveyed through the face and strong movements characterized by stomping, arm swings and chest pops. It has been misconstrued as an aggressive dance and an 'alpha male dance'.<sup>25</sup> The perception of aggression is gendered but also classed and racialized. The dance is in fact a non-violent battle in which self-expression is the essential component. In her discussion of B-girls, Imani Kai Johnson claims that reading their performances through masculinity 'misrecognizes the kind of power to which they stake claim'.<sup>26</sup>

Doherty's focus is firmly fixed on class whilst drawing on a 'legacy of strong, fierce, powerful feminine performances' within the context of Northern Ireland.<sup>27</sup> She references the working-class women of Derry/Londonderry:

there were lots of fabric and shirt factories in Derry, so a lot of women were out at work and the men were at home. It is probably a generalisation, but maybe this had something to do with developing really strong women in Derry. In any case, *Sugar Army* is an ode to this female power.<sup>28</sup>

This is not a postfeminist girl power as alluded to by the references to empowerment in the introductory voice-over, something that can be bought to achieve 'the face of success'. Rather, through the performance of 'Sugar Army', Doherty makes visible a feminism which defies classed gender expectations and speaks to a younger generation of working-class women.

### **The power of community and love**

Doherty's desire to broaden notions of identity and community is reflected in her use of sources outside mainstream popular culture and beyond Northern Ireland. However, her use of indigenous cultures raises issues as, to quote Rustom Bharucha, it ignores 'the particularities of a specific historical condition'.<sup>29</sup> Just as Doherty appropriates the haka tradition for her purposes, she takes inspiration from the Sufi circle,

'decontextualizing "ritual actions" from their larger structures (and thereby neutralizing their meanings)'.<sup>30</sup> For her, the connection between this Islamic tradition and the lives of the Sugar Army is in the creation of community and a manifestation of a 'physical prayer of hope for their future'.<sup>31</sup> Doherty conjures the transformative and transcendental experience through the Sugar Army's movement in a circle which, in the first section of the episode, is marked by efforts to generate a propulsive energy. The moving circle of the Sugar Army gathers momentum, only for a shrill emission of high-pitched sound to invade the space. The Sugar Army gradually slows, each holding a hand to her forehead and drawing together, arms around one another's shoulders. Their capacity to come together is key to their struggle for expression, as individuals and as a group, and therein lies their strength, or, as Doherty puts it,

The power of this section is if the girls truly love each other and truly believe in why they are doing this dance. That's what shines through, special patterns and movement patterns are just a background. Their intent is what will have meaning.<sup>32</sup>

Agency is not individualistic; instead it depends on support and the strength of the group's intent. At one point, one of the group steps forward from the others and 'speaks' to the audience; in effect she is mouthing the words so we cannot hear what she is saying. The struggle to be heard and to make meaning is a profound gesture. When the group are gathered in a huddle, one of them looks over her shoulder at the audience before returning to the group's embrace (Fig 1). This look is open to interpretation: it could be construed as confrontational, defensive, highlighting their



FIG. 1 *Hard to be Soft: A Belfast Prayer*, The MAC, Belfast, October 2017. Image by Luca Truffarelli.

sense of insecurity and of being under surveillance, as well as suggesting a refusal of the audience's gaze and the potential imposition of stereotypical representations of working-class girls by a largely middle-class contemporary dance audience. It also serves to convey how, in a world that cannot hear them or that misinterprets them, they listen to and support one another. This support underpins their intent and emphasizes the Sugar Army's occupation of an alternative expressive realm which is achieved through non-normative gendered affects. Love is a powerful affect that mobilizes and moves the group, a vital coming together against that which oppresses them.

Just as the men in *A Belfast Prayer* find it 'hard to be soft', these young women also hide their vulnerability as a means of survival, as stated in the voice-over: 'putting on their armour and getting on with the day'. There are moments where the Sugar Army are seen physically fighting with one another, but this is countered by their embodiment of community. Functioning as a unit, an army, enables them to survive their insecurity: they fall at times during the choreography but pick themselves up and rejoin the group, carried along by their strength. Beverley Skeggs describes the experiences of the working-class women from the north of England who form her study: 'The women's ontological security was found precisely not in being an "individual" but in "fitting-in"'.<sup>33</sup> 'Fitting in' might be judged as bowing to peer pressure, but it is also a strength for a group who are only permitted to 'shine' through prescribed notions of femininity, as Skeggs further explains: "Individuals" are the product of privilege, who can occupy the economic and social conditions which enable them to do work on the self.<sup>34</sup> Instead, power is something to be accrued for the benefit of the group so that no one is left behind. In contrast to an aggressive and individualist postfeminism, the Sugar Army wield a more nurturing power.

The capacity for solidarity rooted in recognition of interlocking systems of oppression is key to the struggle of the Sugar Army. Intersectionality, as outlined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights 'the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment'.<sup>35</sup> Doherty assembles a new Sugar Army in each touring location (including Lyon, Paris, Berlin, Edinburgh, London and, most recently, New York) and she modifies the choreography to reflect the groups' differing experiences. This process nurtures the potential to address intersections of marginalized experiences and femininities, and to highlight how gender, class and race are not mutually exclusive but build on each other. The cast of the Belfast Sugar Army reflected the predominantly white population of Northern Ireland (96.55 per cent of the resident population identified as 'white' in the 2021 census), although the Sugar Armies assembled in other countries were more diverse. Emma Dabiri notes 'the distinctions between whiteness in the US and the UK and in Ireland, because of course people are racialized as white in all of those countries, but through different formations and through different historical realities, so the whitenesses have different textures, have different dimensions'.<sup>36</sup> The texture of whiteness in Northern Ireland is woven into a society where, though it 'may tend to go unrecognized and unstated, race is a



fundamental aspect of how people construct their sense of identity and, moreover, has tended to underpin the historical development of the two main majority ethnic traditions within the region'.<sup>37</sup> Connolly and Khaoury point to the marginalization of race issues in the North as 'a reflection of the way in which white, settled people's power and privilege within Northern Ireland has become a normalized and taken-for-granted aspect of life here'.<sup>38</sup> Through Doherty's work with the different casts of the touring productions, the 'Sugar Army' episode speaks to intersectional experiences including ethnic and racial identity; however, the 'texture' of whiteness in Northern Ireland remains unmarked with the Belfast cast.

The last section of 'Sugar Army' sees the group fall to the ground.<sup>39</sup> One member then rises and walks through the bodies strewn across the stage to the back of the cage and runs her hand across the bars, seemingly unable to see beyond them. The music shifts to the yearning ethereal feminine vocals accompanied by soaring strings as the stage darkens and the broken bodies scramble backwards across the floor as if pulled towards the isolated individual. They carry her prone body across the stage in a funeral cortège, summoning a 'funeral, a Greek tragedy, a Caravaggio type sacrifice. Godly'.<sup>40</sup> Their struggle is elevated beyond the everyday and eschews gendered narratives of sacrifice which have particular resonance within Republican mythology. The group set the individual army member to her feet and they then walk off downstage left, past the audience. A light pierces through the bars upstage centre and this now solitary girl walks along this shaft of light, looking up at the bars. The cage remains but we are left with hope in her capacity to face it and even see beyond it, a prayer to 'honour young women's own capacities to make positive meaning in their lives, to enjoy the agency they have, and to respect their strategies for doing the best they can'.<sup>41</sup>

### 'The liberation of the howl'

Doherty has described her next work, *Lady Magma: The Birth of a Cult*, as an 'ode to the Sugar Army fight'.<sup>42</sup> Where 'Sugar Army' is defined by struggle and resilience, *Lady Magma* is a celebration of women's bodies, desires and pleasure. In her exploration of the political work of pleasure in contemporary fiction from Northern Ireland, Caroline Magennis notes that 'trauma texts' have 'come to dominate the focus of Northern Irish literary scholarship',<sup>43</sup> and how in these texts and their analysis, 'sexuality was so often used metonymically for sectarian politics'.<sup>44</sup> In *Lady Magma* 'the liberation of the howl' is an act of reclaiming the pain *and* pleasure of silenced bodies. Doherty talks about the experience as a healing ritual, both for the audience and for the dancers: 'To love and to trust their bodies'.<sup>45</sup> It cannot be overstated what a shameless declaration this was on a Northern Irish stage, particularly within the context of the ongoing fight for reproductive justice. The Northern Irish premiere of *Lady Magma* on 31 October 2019 (The MAC, Belfast) was performed in the wake of a period of intense focus on bodily autonomy with the campaign to repeal the 8th Amendment in Ireland. The referendum in the Republic, held on 25 May 2018, saw the resounding defeat of a thirty-five-year-old constitutional amendment which had

effectively banned abortion. The campaign for repeal was defined by the huge outpouring of women's experiences in the public realm, an act which brought women's bodies to the centre of national discourse to refute a historical culture of shame. Support for the campaign was cross-border, and, following the referendum, 'The North is next' was the rallying cry.

*Lady Magma* begins outside the theatre space in the bar, where Negroni (Oona Doherty), dressed in a turban and a 1970s-patterned cloak, leads the audience through some breathing exercises, urging them to 'leave the judgement behind' and to embrace 'a new you'. Upon entering the auditorium, Ciaran Bagnell's lighting and set design welcome the audience into a womb-like space with warm red and orange hues of psychedelic swirling 1970s designs. Audience members are invited to sit on floor cushions and seats that flank the performance space on the stage, in addition to the regular auditorium seating. For the audience who sit onstage there is an intimacy of engagement, in terms of both the subject matter and their proximity to the bodies of the moaning, laughing and sweating dancers. Yet Doherty has indicated her frustration with the limits of the theatre space which is 'suffocating Magma' and expressed her desire to perform in an outdoor woodland setting at dusk.<sup>46</sup> However, there are other aspects which are also hindering Doherty's vision of liberation in *Lady Magma*. The discussion that follows engages with the ways in which the radical potential of the 1970s and second-wave feminism is reawakened but also inhibited by the invisibility of whiteness.

### The movement of magma as *écriture féminine*

In the opening section of *Lady Magma*, the reverb-drenched twangy guitar reminiscent of Duane Eddy gives way to a fuller, fuzzier guitar sound of *Maggot Brain*-era Funkadelic, as David Holmes's music takes us through the 1960s and into the 1970s. The retro feel of the music, together with the set design, returns us to the era of second-wave feminism, and Doherty's fluid movement language arouses the second-wave feminist concept of *écriture féminine*. Hélène Cixous urged women to reclaim their bodies: 'Write your self. Your body must be heard.'<sup>47</sup> In the dimly lit sultry atmosphere of the opening section of *Lady Magma*, the Ladies are lying on the floor as they revel in their slow and sensual movement, arching their backs and moaning in pleasure and pain (Fig. 2). These movements are rooted in a 'gentle slow pulse', the clench and release of the perineum, which gains intensity.<sup>48</sup> As the effects of release and expansion start to build, the Ladies draw together so the generation of fluid movement is explored individually but also amasses the group as one rolling, molten liquid. This (over)flowing sensuality evokes the fluidity of an *écriture féminine* which refuses fixed notions of idealized femininity; the Sugar Army are in tension with the iconography of the Virgin Mary, whereas in *Lady Magma* the statue 'melts away back to the edges of the carpet like a wax Mary on a mantelpiece'.<sup>49</sup> While women's bodies hold a gendered corporeal history inflected by 'disgust, shadow self, grotesque',<sup>50</sup> *Lady Magma* explores a movement language and practice of pleasure which gathers, sticks and slowly releases.



FIG. 2 *Lady Magma*, Atelier de Paris, April 2019. Image by Luca Truffarelli.

*Lady Magma* offers engagement with a corporeal legacy and reconnection through a 'sincere, feminist, pagan, sexual movement language'.<sup>51</sup> The Ladies' pleasures and desires generate heat and energy which flow through and between their bodies.

Following the individual exploration of 'the pulse, clench and release' in the opening minutes, the process of 'melting' gathers the group: their movements are kept low to the ground as they appear to flow across the floor like liquid and then merge as one of the Ladies rises to her feet from the centre of the group in a moment of release. Her expression echoes the exaggerated facial contortions which shaped 'Sugar Army' and refused a gendered respectability, but here is an unruly feminist affect materializing a corporeal history of pleasure and pain. In the section that follows, the Ladies gather along the back wall and drop into a unified 'funkadelic pelvic grind'<sup>52</sup> to the new rhythms of a funk lick processed through fuzz and wahwah of 1970s psych-soul production sound pioneered by Norman Whitfield. Their journey across the floor is driven by the grind of their hips and the group's rolling movement echoes their gyrating bodies. Their practice of pleasure intensifies during a break in the music when the drums are stripped back and a swelling moment of suspension is created as the strings soar and build to a crescendo. In a line facing the audience, the dancers' bodies shudder in unison, their faces express delight and they raise their trembling hands skywards. Immediately, the rhythm kicks back in and the dance resumes, echoing the ebb and flow of female orgasmic experience.

As the dance continues, the performers increasingly explore individual movement and this loosening of uniform patterns is amplified in an echo of the 'Sugar Army' choreography, as the Ladies run in a circular formation as they raise their hands. However, it is notable that the women in *Lady Magma* have more freedom to express their individuality. Unlike the Sugar Army, their steps are not in unison and they face outwards towards the audience, smiling and including them. The dancers randomly break away from the circle and rejoin at will. The music of this section winds down and the auditorium is quiet as the group bands together. Their movement is relaxed; the dancers hug and they caress one another's smiling faces. The group bond together and as they lean on one another this causes them to sway and fall en masse. Nonetheless, they keep one another afloat as the magma sticks them together. This bonding is carried into the next section as the dancers offer physical and emotional support to one another during their solos: by paying close attention to and 'holding' the solo dancer as the group unites around them, sometimes touching, other times extending a hand to help another to their feet.

As these individual explorations of what Doherty describes as a 'Freedom or Chaos state' develop, the familiarity of the rhythms and guitar of funk music gives way to percussive free jazz. The music is freed from structure and the dancers increasingly break out of synchronized movements and patterns. Doherty articulates the difficulty for the dancers of liberating themselves from their training in order to achieve the physical state she terms the 'Freedom or Chaos state': 'And by freedom I think I mean new and unusual movement patterns. Which is very difficult to achieve in trained dancer's legs. I have found that the legs fight to perform within the known pattern.'<sup>53</sup> The soundtrack is enhanced by the whoops and howls of the Ladies as they watch one another; delighting in one another's resistance to limiting 'patterns' and their exploration of pleasure and pain. The corporealities in *Lady Magma* are more mature than those of the Sugar Army: they hold more experience and history, as women and

as dancers. The Ladies' maturity facilitates their engagement with this freedom but they are also in a more privileged position as bodies whose class and race are unmarked.

### Feminism's sticking points

What makes the invisibility of whiteness in *Lady Magma* conspicuous is Doherty's use of black culture in the work. This is most acutely apparent in the final section, which sees Pink Breath (Aoife McAtamney) take centre stage and sing. In 'Sugar Army', the girls struggle to be heard, but voice is celebrated in *Lady Magma*. Doherty took inspiration from jazz singer Abbie Lincoln's wordless vocals in *Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace*, and asked McAtamney to learn it. Doherty recuperates Abbie Lincoln's prayer to express silenced experiences, yet although she draws on black culture this is at odds with the white cast. Doherty has openly addressed the issues of appropriation and exclusion in her reflections on *Lady Magma*. She notes that there 'were two major mistakes': first, that there was 'no colour in the cast' despite the fact the work is so heavily influenced by black music, and second, that there was not enough of a mix of body types.<sup>54</sup> Doherty describes how she had come to the realization that all the dancers she picked were white but had not anticipated a critique of their body shapes. Doherty was shocked by an early review of the work in France, where the dancers' 'chubby thighs' were commented on.<sup>55</sup> These were valuable lessons for Doherty: 'It was just the first time I ever could really see the bubble I was in. So in a sense in some ways for me *Lady Magma* has failed.'<sup>56</sup> Second-wave feminism has been criticized by black feminists and third-wave feminists as a white, middle-class movement. The intersectionality which developed counter to this circulates through 'Sugar Army' but is not brought to bear on *Lady Magma*. However, *Lady Magma* has not 'failed', as Doherty's re-vision of the second-wave idea of an *écriture féminine* through the movement of magma offers a radical approach that *does* have the capacity to fully engage with the sticky intersections of identity.

'Written' through magma, this is an energetic process, of heat and change, which releases pleasure, but we need to pay attention to what impedes its movement and what sticks. Doherty undertakes similar movement tasks and warm-ups for both 'Sugar Army' and *Lady Magma*, using magma and honey as a movement source and prompt for improvisation. As Doherty describes it: 'The room being filled with thick warm golden honey, seeping in-between the joints, the flesh, under the tongue up the anus. This results in a juicy fluid movement with its own resistance against air.'<sup>57</sup> Honey and lava are viscous substances imbued with resistance. The movement of magma is potentially at its most radical and explosive when it is mobilized to engage with these viscous intersections, rather than passing over them. We can explore these sticking points as intersections of experience to invigorate the movement of feminism. In terms of representations of second-wave feminism, what 'sticks' is whiteness and essentialist interpretations of *écriture féminine*. Essentialism is rooted in fixed biological prescriptions of gender, yet Doherty's movement language offers an *écriture féminine* which encourages people of all genders to reconnect with their bodies. One of the dancers in *Hard to Be Soft*, John Scott, describes the movement of the 'Meat

Kaleidoscope' episode: 'Our dance is generated from three physical/mental states: Concrete, Manuka Honey and Lazarus (waking from the dead and every part of your body turning to stained glass opening to the light).<sup>58</sup> Reawakening is achieved by exploring a concrete hardness which liquifies to release that which is being held in the body and sticks. The emphasis is on process and transformation to unloose gendered patterns in movement and expose the illusion of an originary female or male body. Moreover, magma can work with its viscosity to explore intersections of experience and offer a more capacious and non-essentialist understanding of the category of 'woman'.

### Feminism in movement

In Doherty's poem 'A Concrete Song', which inspired *Hard to Be Soft*, we are told, 'Nothing's linear'.<sup>59</sup> While the 1970s setting and music of *Lady Magma*, together with the older generation of dancers, may suggest a chronological arc, the release engendered through *Lady Magma* speaks to the women who have gone before and positions the Sugar Army as mothers: 'This is clearing. Be gone. For you and your mothers.'<sup>60</sup> The renewal of *écriture féminine* through the movement of magma seeks to nurture reconnection with the body, whilst engaging with the potential to be invigorated by 'the women who have gone before', namely the Sugar Army's intersectional approach and address of what 'sticks'. The fact that this is not fully realized reveals the persistence of mainstream feminism's blind spot with regard to race and thus complicates an easy narrative of progress. In contrast to the simplicity of the wave model of a history of feminism with delineated waves that surge and recede, we can discern a more complex picture, akin to Clare Hemmings's proposal to imagine 'the feminist past somewhat differently – as a series of ongoing contests and relationships rather than a process of imagined linear displacement'.<sup>61</sup> In Doherty's work this is a dialogue across generations of feminist thought and between generations of women.

The feminisms that circulate in 'Sugar Army' and *Lady Magma* destabilize a linear narrative of progression or loss; a simple teleological account of the superiority of newer feminisms or nostalgia for the passing of a better feminism. Elizabeth Freeman argues for 'putting the past into meaningful and transformative relation with the present' through assessment of nostalgia in the work of queer feminist artists:

Pure nostalgia for another revolutionary moment, their works seem to argue, will not do. But nor will it's opposite, a purely futural orientation that depends on forgetting the past. Instead, the queerness of these artists consists in mining the present for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions.<sup>62</sup>

Doherty's mining of 'past revolutions' within the context of feminism in Northern Ireland is felt as a longing for a feminist revolution which was derailed by the Troubles. The 'undetonated energy' speaks to the movement of magma as the reinvigoration of *écriture féminine* through intersectionality; nostalgia not stuck in the past but invigorated by a reawakening and ongoing feminist dialogue.

Doherty's refusal of linearity has the potential to mobilize a dynamic intergenerational and intersectional feminism which recognizes 'differently positioned women'. The dancers in both 'Sugar Army' and *Lady Magma* explore the movement of magma and honey, and thus have a shared history, both lived and danced. Their experiences are in dialogue and they can learn from one another's battles within and against 'patterns', and normative femininities. However, what is vital is acknowledgement and exploration of difference, and the affects and experiences that 'stick'. It is only through addressing these sticking points that solidarity can be generated. In reflection on *Lady Magma*, Doherty says,

But I don't know if it is finished. Maybe it never will be, maybe the circles of women who pass through it are greater than I know ... Maybe the cast will keep changing with more range in age and size and color and voice? Maybe will just be one huge magma with all the women 50 women in the woods?<sup>63</sup>

Doherty may yet assemble an army of Sugars and Magmas, an intergenerational rising with the capacity to invigorate both the viscous movement of magma and the continued movement of feminism.

#### NOTES

- 1 This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No. 889279.
- 2 At [www.hardtobesoft.com/about](http://www.hardtobesoft.com/about) (no longer available).
- 3 Theresa O'Keefe, 'Bridge-Builder Feminism: The Feminist Movement and Conflict in Northern Ireland', *Irish Political Studies*, 36, 1 (2021), pp. 52–71, here p. 61.
- 4 Premiere: 26 October 2017, The MAC, Belfast. Dance critic Sanjoy Roy named *Hard to Be Soft: A Belfast Prayer* *The Guardian's* choice as best dance show of 2019.
- 5 Premiere: 3 April 2019, Atelier de Paris, Carolyn Carlson, Cartoucherie.
- 6 Eilish Rooney, 'Women in Northern Irish Politics: Difference Matters' in C. Roulston and C. Davies, eds., *Gender, Democracy and Inclusion in Northern Ireland* (London: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 164–86, here p. 166.
- 7 The Northern Ireland Executive collapsed in January 2017 (attributed to the Renewable Heat Incentive scandal) and as a result the Executive were given a deadline to re-form by 21 October 2019, otherwise the powers of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would be extended with conditions, including the liberalization of abortion law and legalization of same-sex marriage. The Executive did not re-form by the deadline and both issues were passed into law. The legal framework was passed in Westminster in March 2020 but full abortion services are still not available. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has started legal proceedings against the Executive for failing to commission and fund abortion care.
- 8 Evason Eileen, *Hidden Violence* (Belfast: Farcet Press, 1982).
- 9 See Police Service Northern Ireland statistics, published 12 May 2022, at [www.psni.police.uk/sites/default/files/2022-08/domestic-abuse-bulletin-mar-\\_22\\_1.pdf](http://www.psni.police.uk/sites/default/files/2022-08/domestic-abuse-bulletin-mar-_22_1.pdf) (accessed 8 November 2022).
- 10 O'Keefe, 'Bridge-Builder Feminism', p. 68.
- 11 Author's email correspondence with Oona Doherty, 20 August 2020.
- 12 Oona Doherty, in collaboration with Aoife McGrath, *Lady Magma: The Birth and Death of a Cult* (Ebook: Oona Doherty, 2019), p. 59.
- 13 Lyra McKee, 'We Were Meant to Be the Generation That Reaped the Spoils of Peace', *The Guardian*, 28 March 2020. Journalist and LGBT activist Lyra McKee died after being shot while observing rioting in Derry/Londonderry on 18 April 2019. The New IRA admitted to carrying out the killing.

- 14 Tom Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland: Through and beyond the Troubles* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), p. 21.
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- 16 Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 93.
- 17 Rosalind Gill, 'Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times', *Subjectivity*, 25 (2008), pp. 432–45, here p. 443.
- 18 McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 125; Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender* (London: Sage, 1997).
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- 20 Doherty, email, 20 August 2020.
- 21 Rosalind Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20, 6 (2017), pp. 606–26, here p. 618.
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- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
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- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
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- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 163.
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- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 192–3.
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- 40 Doherty, email, 20 August 2020.
- 41 Harris, *Future Girl*, p. 184.
- 42 Doherty with McGrath, *Lady Magma*, p. 68.
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- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 160.



- 45 Doherty with McGrath, *Lady Magma*, p. 47.  
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