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Title: Re-membering Red Riding Hood: culturally-situated solidarities between Ireland and Uganda

Abstract: Red Riding Hood is a story that has been retold and reimagined more frequently than most. Where the oral tradition often celebrated Red's sexuality and cunning, literary versions transform the tale into one in which a young girl is blamed for her own rape – or, in many feminist versions, where she fights back. Drawing on discussions with writers and feminist activists in Uganda, and on work by Ugandan and Irish writers and scholars, I explore how this troubling and ambiguous story can be used to facilitate communication across difference and culturally-situated solidarities. I present a retelling of Red Riding Hood from an Irish perspective, using this as a springboard to explore parallels and disjunctures between Irish and Ugandan storytelling traditions and perspectives on women's rights and sexuality. I explore the potential of using this well-known European story to surface and contest dominant framings of women's rights, and as a contact point to enable dialogue between more peripheral European (Irish) and Ugandan (Buganda and Busoga) cultural traditions, facilitating mutual recognition, while remaining aware of and explicitly surfacing differences between these traditions. Telling and retelling ambiguous stories like Red Riding Hood can create space to consider where we come from and what we desire, and how those desires might be engaged through or might influence relationships of solidarity.

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Re-membering Red Riding Hood: culturally-situated solidarities between Ireland and Uganda

> The eyes are big because I want to see you.
>
> The lips are big because I want to kiss you.
>
> The hands are big because I want to pat you.
>
> My dear granddaughter.
>
> —Juliet Kushaba, Kampala, March 2020

Introduction

In this article, I explore the potential of storytelling for enabling communication across difference and the articulation of culturally-situated solidarities between feminist activists in Ireland and Uganda. Such solidarities are mediated by colonial legacies, and how women's rights are framed in development and human rights interventions, but they are also informed – or have the potential to be – by locally-specific commitments and cultural references. In combining and transforming material from different sources, storytelling practices are ideally suited for exploring how dominant articulations of women's rights – as a widely shared vocabulary for articulating political claims – might be reimagined and supplemented. I first present a retelling of the story of Red Riding Hood from my own, Irish perspective. I then use this ambivalent story as a springboard to explore parallels and disjunctures between Irish and Ugandan perspectives on women's rights and sexuality, drawing on the perspectives of participants in a storytelling workshop hosted by Ugandan women writers' association Femrite,[1] and on work by Ugandan and Irish scholars and writers. The discussion follows

[1] I held a four-hour workshop with members of Femrite's Monday night readers/writers club. In the first part of the workshop we were a small group of six women and one man; we focused on the Red Riding Hood tradition. In the second half we were about twenty, in which there were more women than men, but in which men made more and longer interventions; we looked at two Ugandan ogre stories – Mudo and Nsangi – and finished with my retelling of Red Riding Hood. Participants were mostly middle-class young adults. Discussions were in English, the language generally used at Femrite and among middle-class Kampala residents, and some participants referred to terms from different local languages (which not all participants spoke). I have regularly attended Femrite events when in Uganda; based on our previous interactions, I was confident that there were a number of workshop participants who would feel comfortable critiquing my approach. Working with middle-class, English-speaking participants as an invited visitor in a context and space that they feel ownership of

the logic of the story, in the form of a commentary referring back to the text. (The story and discussion both include references to sexual violence.)

Red Riding Hood is a particularly well-known folktale, engaged and adapted by writers around the world (Beckett 2014; Orenstein 2002; Zipes 1993). Standard versions of the story mirror popular narratives about women's rights, notably in bestselling novels and campaign materials about powerless Third World women who need rescuing from supposedly savage men (Anker 2012: 35-49; Fernandes 2017: 38-68; cf. Kapur 2018: 89; Mutua 2002: 10-38). Red Riding Hood has also been adapted and retold by feminists around the world in ways that emphasise Red's agency (Beckett 2014: 63-134; Orenstein 2002: 157-176; Zipes 1993: 58-61, 64-65, 343, 380). Comparably, women's rights programmes are increasingly framed in terms of empowering women as survivors and agents, rather than rescuing victims. However, this shift in emphasis obscures the persistence of a relatively narrow set of priorities in women's rights and gender equality programmes, which often focus on sexual violence, individual agency, and market participation, to the neglect of other dimensions of women's economic, social, and sexual lives (Cornwall 2018; Kapur 2018: 85-119; Madhok and Rai 2012). The global reach of the European story of Red Riding Hood – both in its standard and feminist versions – mirrors the ubiquity of this narrow set of priorities in women's rights work. In this article, I explore how imaginative storytelling – as a reflexive, collective practice apt for negotiating multiple, often opposing ideas and knowledges (Mohanty 2003: 8, 79-82) – can be used to disrupt and diversify the shared vocabularies and communicative strategies available for negotiating transnational feminist solidarities.

Feminist theorists and activists have long grappled with the difficulties and inequities of transnational feminist knowledge production, activism, and cross-border organising (Anderl 2020; Conway 2017; Mohanty 2003; Nagar 2014). Transnational encounters – especially across borders of class and

mitigated to some extent the power imbalance between myself and participants. Some participants have asked for any contributions they make to be accredited to them by name, others to be anonymous; I have followed that direction in this article and shared the text with all of them. I have also performed and discussed the story with academic audiences at Makerere University in Uganda, and at the universities of York and Warwick in the UK.

privilege – are often mediated by colonial and patriarchal legacies, racism, persistent epistemic injustices, and mutual unintelligibility, all of which hinder communication, solidarity, and collaboration across difference (Conway 2011; Falcón 2016). A number of researchers have elaborated principles to guide more ethical and respectful solidarity and collaboration between global North and South (de Jong 2017: 147-158; Newman, Bharadwaj and Fransman 2019; Rajan 2018). In response to growing antiracist movements and calls to decolonise knowledge and activism, there has been increasing focus on allyship; calls for privileged white people to support struggles initiated by those with the most pointed experiences of oppression. However, Emma Dabiri argues that allyship has much in common with paternalistic white saviour narratives, reinforcing division and racialised categorisation (2021: 13-27, 83-88). Instead, she argues for the importance of coalitions that bring people together around shared interests – and awareness of how the current system is harming us all – to achieve substantial, structural change, all while remaining mindful of 'the different textures of our varied but interconnected struggles' (Dabiri 2021: 41, 129-134). Part of this involves resisting the impulse to categorise and problem-solve, instead tapping into other ways of knowing such as music, dance, and other 'fugitive' forms of consciousness (Dabiri 2021: 112-113, 141-144).

This article emerges from a collaborative project using the arts to disrupt dominant narratives in international development. In that project, we were struck by how participant contributions were shaped by familiar cultural references or heritage narratives – both indigenous and colonially-inflected (Flower and Kelly 2019: 236-237). This prompted me to reflect on how my own cultural references shape my contributions and analysis, and whether these might be relevant to the development of these collaborations. Ireland occupies a shifting and uncomfortable place in debates on decolonisation, as canonically postcolonial, in terms of literary and activist histories, but also bound up in the white saviour narratives of the Catholic missions and, more recently, the international development sector. In the context of calls for decolonising knowledge and activism, my work involves grappling with my position of privilege and implication in systems of oppression, but also contesting the colonial and patriarchal dynamics that have obscured and silenced elements from my own cultural heritage. In *Something Torn and New*, which extends his earlier discussion in

Decolonising the Mind (1986), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o draws analogies between poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's observations on writing in the Irish language, and efforts to 're-member' through African languages the dismembered social memory of African elites and diasporas (2009: 39-57). This article explores whether my own attempts to decolonise the mind – through engagement with the Irish language and traditions – might be relevant to my emerging relationships of solidarity with Ugandan activists and artists. It asks whether insights from marginalised European traditions might be deployed in efforts to reimagine women's rights, as well as insights from non-European cultural traditions and epistemologies. I use a multivocal European story that is likely to be familiar to people in many different places as a contact point to put more peripheral European (Irish) and Ugandan (Buganda and Busoga) cultural traditions in dialogue. I engage these marginalised cultural traditions not from the perspective of 'feminist-as-explorer,' but rather from a comparative, solidarity-oriented perspective that tries to surface 'complexities, singularities, and interconnections,' and to make space for dissent (Mohanty 2003: 240-245).

I start from the assumption that most cultural traditions, whether dominant or marginalised, are neither inherently oppressive nor inherently emancipatory. Various cultural traditions encode worldviews that enrich women's lives and motivate their struggles for justice, and that can be used to challenge restrictive framings of women's rights. Yet such traditions can also be normative and oppressive, deployed by political actors to silence feminist struggles (Nnaemeka 2004: 370-375; Tamale 2020: 187-234). I suggest that storytelling can be used as a mechanism to surface and negotiate these tensions and enable deeper understanding of the diverse cultural legacies that influence and are important to feminists and feminist activism in different places. Inspired by Richa Nagar's work on transnational feminisms, I explore how imaginative storytelling enables productive dialogue in a language that 'can be accessed, used and critiqued by audiences in multiple social and institutional locations.' This might help us articulate situated solidarities that take account of the complexity and contradictions of where we come from and the contexts in which we are embedded (cf. Nagar 2014: 5, 14, 82-88, 95-96, 161). Sujatha Fernandes emphasises how the places and protocols of telling and interpretation give stories meaning, taking culture, place and relationships as

the (often imperfect) basis for political struggles (2017: 7, 160-161). Following Obioma Nnaemeka, I consider how storytelling might be used to create a 'space clearing that allows a multiplicity of different but related frameworks from different locations to touch, intersect, and feed off each other in a way that accommodates different realities and histories' and generates new forms of theory (2004: 362-363, 365-366, 381-382).

By sharing elements from an Irish context, which might be unfamiliar to the reader, embedded in a story which is more widely known, I engage the tension between my distinctive cultural situatedness and the evocation of cultural references that I am confident of sharing with at least some members of my audience.[2] This invites audiences to consider the possibility of situated solidarity in a context of incomplete but growing knowledge of the other, as part of a process of becoming skilled in using a broader range of sense-making practices – such as storytelling – which might allow us to notice more or certain types of details about neglected experiences. It tests the degree to which people in one place might respond and relate (or not) to preoccupations and cultural references from elsewhere. As compared to an interactive performance, presenting the story in writing removes key elements of the performance text – the interaction between audience and performer, changing dynamics, the musicality of words from the Irish language. Nonetheless, the style of writing aims to evoke elements of the performance text, bringing these into the context of academic writing, in which the non-linear and imaginative dimensions of storytelling are unusual and potentially disruptive. Including the story as an integral part of the argument asks the reader to move away from a position of analytic detachment to embrace what is not quite understood. This exploits the potential of stories, riddles, and language games as tools for theorising (Christian 1987: 52; Nnaemeka 2004: 365), and how the pleasure of engaging with a story might seduce audiences into thinking in new ways (Mihai 2018: 396, 403-405).

[2] Cristina Bacchilega argues that by centring the materiality of women's experiences and Caribbean traditions and orality, Nalo Hopkinson's adaptations of Red Riding Hood have the potential to provincialise the Perrault and Grimm versions that for many readers are the 'home texts' (2013: 24-27, 38-50).

In framing this inquiry in terms of my own, Irish perspective, before bringing in perspectives from Uganda, I choose not to speak from the anonymous position of the unmarked scholar – 'from a place that is *just there*, that place which is no place' – but firmly locate myself in the context of the complex intersection of cultural traditions that have influenced me. I write from the position of a European, cis-gendered scholar racialised as white, inextricably implicated in the very structures and practices that I try to contest; notably, the legacies of missionary and development interventions (cf. Azumah Dennis 2018: 190, 193-196, emphasis original). Just as the storytelling workshop invited my Ugandan interlocutors to consider whether my own cultural references might be relevant to our shared conversation, so this article invites the reader to consider whether I have the right to bring these cultural references into the process of writing and theorising. In a standard academic article, these references often remain invisible, in the deployment of naturalised analytic categories supposed to have cross-cultural validity (Mohanty 2003: 107). My approach tries to make more explicit the ways in which our work in other places might intersect with and be informed by our emotional and political implication in analogous debates closer to home – as well as the degree to which academic analysis of what we encounter in less familiar contexts might be influenced by and read through the lens of what we are more familiar with. To supplement and highlight the incompleteness of my situated perspective, I draw on discussions with workshop participants and on work by Ugandan scholars and writers.[3]

Now let me tell you a story I know.

The story

[3] Readers may also be interested in participatory research conducted in local languages by Ugandan scholars, using oral poetry (Kiguli and Plastow 2015) and sculpture (Nabulime and McEwan 2010) to explore issues related to women's sexuality.

Once upon a time, somewhere in the world, a girl standing at the edge of a forest knocked on a door. It was getting dark.

I was sat in the corner watching, where I always sat. Behind her, the ghost of a forest hung in the air, caught in the mist. Her cap was sodden and her boots black with the dank water she had had to wade through. It wasn't always this grim. Sometimes the forest floor was dry and springy and the light filtering through the branches threw dappled shade around her. Other times she'd turn up, her coat ripped and her lips black and blue (she went a bit mad for the berries). The taller and older the trees, the more she imagined things, seeing men in the shadows and tripping over roots and branches. But this time the mist hung dense around her and the forest was barely visible through two hundred years of fog.

Inside was dim and musty and sharp. The girl felt for the familiar table, put down her heavy basket and gave her arm a rub. She waited for her eyes to adjust. She knew the drill, rattling through the things she had to say, bawdy or prim according to her mood, until there was no point in delaying the inevitable any longer. 'What big teeth you have,' she would say. In this place where the forest was long gone, I had less patience. Sometimes I came as a little man and as soon as she put the basket down on the table, I snatched the baby inside it, replacing it with one of our own. Off I dashed skipping lightly across the bog, the child screaming in my arms, face red as a fox's pelt, and me tossing the child in the air as I ran. And the parties under that hill, my god, like nothing you've ever seen. But mostly I'd stay for a bit of riddling and there was no point if she could never win so I'd give her a bit of a handicap and pretend that I believed her pretending that the child in the basket wasn't worth a silver penny.

In this place she'd usually start with, 'Where's my granny?' There's no flies on that one, she saw through the little nightcap straight off, although the whiskers on that old woman and the sharp beak on her, it wouldn't have been everyone who could tell us apart. The world was old then and the wild animals had thinned out with the trees, so we had an affinity: each of us with a *caipín rua,* a thick red

pelt against the cold and the rain. The fire sputtered and smoked in the grate – *cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmad* only be half blinded – but I put up with it and from time to time they'd find a lump of old oak in the bog and that burned nice and bright and hot. That day, as it was so cold, I couldn't help but offer the girl the lovely little pudding I'd made with the old lady's hot blood – there was little enough flesh on her – wafer and wine in one bite. People are into that the whole world over, dress it up nice as you like with smells and bells; that Mis knew exactly what she was doing and what's more, liked it. The girl brushed bloody crumbs off her lip and smiled.

As she warmed she pulled off her cap and then her coat and then her shawl and dropped them on the floor. She reached into the basket, drew out the child and set it on her lap. In another place she might have thrown her garments in the fire, but here everything she wore was so damp it would have dowsed the flame. Girl didn't do her justice; she was a young woman and had known a man alright however proper she sat now on that hard chair, thick woollen skirts down to her ankles and arms fast to her sides when she danced. I shivered under my rough blanket. And whatever about herself, that child was a token worth playing for. 'Follow the gold, you'll never get old, the first sign of pity, you turn to bones.' She was starting off easy with *Tír na nÓg*. That was some trick to get Oisín down off his horse and on his first trip back, the eejit. The years caught up with him alright as soon as he touched the ground. I preened not only for knowing the answer but also because in the firelight my pelt glinted bright as Niamh's mop of gold hair. The girl moved off the chair to the edge of the bed. The child in her arms squirmed and slipped out of her grasp to crawl around on the filthy floor.

My turn now. 'What a raven once told, drawn to heat in the cold.' She was quick off the mark: Naoise's hair black as the wing of the bird, skin white as the snow underfoot and lips bitten red raw bright as the blood it feasted on. That Deirdre was a right dote. And throwing herself from a chariot; what a way to go, really setting herself up as a rival to your one in Verona. That's a story worth resurrecting. Although they're a miserable lot here, it has to be said, with all their sorrows and laments. If I wasn't careful the girl would start roaring crying again over her own lost love, long since off on his travels looking for gold in France. She moved to go back to the chair. It was still lashing

rain outside and the night stretched thick and black and empty until it reached the sea. 'You're the one who brought up the ill-fated lovers,' I whined, 'you could at least give us a nibble – just a little finger….'She laughed and flicked her skirt at me and bent to pick up the baby and throw another bit of peat on the fire. 'Ups-a-daisy; *éirigh suas a stóirín*.' She dumped the child on my bed and it promptly shat in its pants, filling the room with a stench almost as rank as my own. I've let people go for less before. Never mind; the game had begun.

To be honest this wasn't the best time and place for riddling I've ever come across. There's a fair litany of riddles and tricks that lads like Cú Chulainn and the Fianna came up with and they take a bit of telling but in the end they usually come down to killing and that can get boring after a while. Not that the place being soaked with blood is a problem for me but how can you get real enjoyment if they all pile up together like that. All the same it was atmospheric with the hounds howling outside and the rain lashing the windows and the light of the fire keeping the *sí* at bay. Mostly I let the girl win. I mean, riddling is as riddling does, but I've had a fair bit of that recently and when the child, recently changed, fell into sleep, she wrapped it in her shawl and sat on my couch singing lullabies, her bare white shoulders the brightest point in the room. '*Siúil, siúil, siúil a rún, siúil go tapaí 's siúil go ciúin*; flee, flee, quickly child, out the door by my side.' If you do run, dear, clumsy child, you'd better watch you don't fall into the bog.

Rock, reel and spinning wheel wagered and lost; she'll dye her petticoats alright, dye them bright as Naoise's lips on his white, pallid face that had so rarely seen the sun.

But some things don't bear telling.

When I was sated I slept and as I slept everything changed and when I woke I was alone again, once upon a time, somewhere in the world, standing at the edge of a forest and knocking on a door. 'Get up love and get the door and let me into the house if you're not up already; and here's a bottle for yourself and I hope you don't refuse me your daughter after all that.'

Siúil, siúil, siúil a rún,

Siúil go sochair agus siúil go ciúin,

Siúil go doras agus éalaigh liom.

Is go dté tú mo mhúirnín slán.

Go safely love; go safely.

The discussion

Once upon a time, somewhere in the world, a girl standing at the edge of a forest knocked on a door. It was getting dark.

The story of Red Riding Hood, with its injunction not to go into the forest alone, is a folktale that has been retold and reimagined more frequently than most (Zipes 1993: 18, 36-67, 343; Beckett 2014). In the storytelling workshop in Uganda, participants were not completely confident about the details, but were able to remember the story together, remaking it even as they recalled it. Amanda Joy remembered a girl walking through the forest, hungry, and entering a cabin to find a beast. This promoted Juliet Kushaba to recall and embellish the words of the beast; with the familiar line, 'The eyes are big because I want to see you,' followed by the less familiar, 'The lips are big because I want to kiss you. The hands are big because I want to pat you.' Juliet then paused and said she remembered a story – 'I don't know if it's the same story' – in which a beast 'ran home […] ate the grandmother and entered her bed,' tricking the girl when she 'returned [home] from the forest.' 'That is the story' said Elijah Bwojji, 'that is Little Red Riding Hood,' where the danger, like in many Ugandan ogre stories, is as much at home as it is in the forest. For those unfamiliar with the Red Riding Hood tradition, the story may still be legible due to parallels with other stories they know, such as ogre stories from Uganda that follow a similar pattern (cf. Tibasiima 2013: 182-185). This discussion considers how the variety within and differences between these traditions adds richness to discussions about women's rights. Specifically, I consider whether such stories can be used to uncover

assumptions underlying different articulations of women's rights and feminism, and to facilitate communication across difference in efforts to build solidarity.

Behind her, the ghost of a forest hung in the air, caught in the mist.

The story of Red Riding Hood is one I have heard and read in many versions as a child and as an adult. Yet the forests of that story are not the landscapes of my childhood. Ireland has been sparsely wooded for at least three hundred years (Hall 1997); 'the ghost of a forest' in my story hangs above the more familiar stretches of blanket bog. Ní Dhomhnaill emphasises the importance of *dinnseanchas* (placelore) in lyrical and storytelling traditions in Ireland, puncturing the narrative arc of epic with elegiac ruminations on the beauty and power of specific places (2005: 156-169). Comparably, Susan Kiguli describes how Ugandan riddling picks up on elements of the local environment: '*Kati kiringa ekigamba omwana nti, "tunula, laba wooli."* […] Now, it is like telling a child, "observe, see where you are" […] *Naye kikulaga nti ebyo ebintu ebibeera wano naffe nabyo byamugaso* […] It shows you that the things around us also have value' (cited in Mushengyezi 2013: 38). In the workshop, many of the details that participants recalled after hearing the story related to the description of the environment: the ghost of the forest, the fog, the dark, the thinning trees. These concrete details seemed to give them a handle on an unfamiliar story set in an unfamiliar place. 'My favourite part,' one participant said, 'was this girl, the point where her, her lips were coloured, it is blue and – black because of the berries. I don't know how but somehow I just imagined it was [a participant from Sweden] and the image really came out well, I was imagining her …'

Other times she'd turn up, her coat ripped and her lips black and blue (she went a bit mad for the berries).

Wild blueberries (*fraocháin*) are found in the valley of Glendalough near to where I grew up; it was said that young girls who went off to pick them on their own were later found 'not in their right minds' (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005: 89, 94-95). Ripe berries are highly euphemistic. One Banyankore

riddle, performed in Kiruhura in western Uganda by master-teller Katuka, refers to berry picking: '*Ahi enkyerere ihisize ziri, hariho encweera* […] Where ripe berries are, there is a cobra.' On a literal level, Aaron Mushengyezi explains, this riddle 'sounds a warning to children to be careful as they scamper through the bush.' It is expected to be taken literally until children are old enough to decipher the layers of meaning and deeper sexual innuendo: '*N'omugurusi oshweire omukazi muto! Omukazi muto – (yaasheka) omukazi muto n'enkyerere ihiisize! N'obu orikuzirya encweera nekwiita! Ee? Encweera egi nekwiita!* […] It is an old man who has married a young wife! A young wife – (laughter) a young wife is ripe berries! You eat them but the cobra will kill you! Eh? That cobra will kill you!' That is, according to Mushengyezi, '[t]he old man may fail to satisfy the young woman's sexual desire.' Adults might underestimate how much of this meaning that children understand: as they 'progress into puberty their sexual curiosity undoubtedly leads them into exploring this grey, "transgressive zone"' (Mushengyezi 2013: 20-24).

The taller and older the trees, the more she imagined things, seeing men in the shadows and tripping over roots and branches.

The story that we know as Little Red Riding Hood is mediated by two literary versions: the first, by Charles Perrault, in which Red meets a grisly end consumed by the wolf (1697), and later, cleaned up by the brothers Grimm, in which Red and her grandmother are rescued by a huntsman (Grimm and Grimm 1812). Many oral versions of Red Riding Hood end with the girl saving herself; Jack Zipes argues that the Perrault and Grimm versions transform a tale of a young girl's initiation into one in which a helpless girl is blamed for her own rape (1993: 7, 25-27, 79-81; cf. Bacchilega 1997: 53-58; Orenstein 2002: 149-152; Vaz da Silva 2016; Verdier 1997). Folktales – whether oral or written – tend to be both normative and subversive, encoding conflictual struggle between women, and reinforcing social norms even as they have the potential to transform them (Bacchilega 1997: 6-7; Verdier 1997: 117). The point is not that the oral tradition is inherently emancipatory, but rather that it is multivocal, including elements that are silenced in many literary versions.

She knew the drill, rattling through the things she had to say, bawdy or prim according to her mood, until there was no point in delaying the inevitable any longer. 'What big teeth you have,' she would say.

In Juliet's version of Red Riding Hood, the reference to the wolf's big eyes was followed by a reference to its big lips 'to kiss you with' and big hands 'to pat you with.' Yet when I told the story in a way that emphasised Red's sexuality, echoing her words, Juliet said 'that's an adult story. We've never read it that way!' Some oral versions of Red Riding Hood include a bawdy call and response, with the wolf coaxing Red to take off item after item of clothing and throw them in the fire (Verdier 1997: 111; Zipes 1993: 25-26). After hearing my improvised version, which included this striptease, Amanda asked, 'how naïve could she have been […] that whole process, and then she discovers that she's already naked and gets into the bed. […] There was a lot of time to think about the decisions that she was making.' Bwojji suggested 'the fault is the parents', they never told her to pay attention. […] The mother would have been aware of this kind of society they are living in. And she would have been more cautious, would have protected her more. So even when she tells her to go to the forest, she would have given her some warnings. Because at least they would have known that the creature lives in that forest.'

Ní Dhomhnaill in Ireland and Sylvia Tamale in Uganda both argue that patriarchy, colonialism and religion have repressed relatively positive precolonial conceptualisations of female sexuality (Ni Dhomhnaill 2005: 17-19; Tamale 2014: 160-169). Tamale argues, with reference to religion, '[b]y keeping sexual pleasure in the background and foregrounding the risks and dangers associated with sexuality, practices of self-surveillance, particularly for women, are intensified' (2014: 162). The human rights and development sectors may reinforce such practices of surveillance by approaching questions of sexuality through the lens of interventions about sexual violence and health risks. This frames women's sexuality in terms of risk and danger to the neglect of more positive dimensions such as pleasure (Marais 2019; McFadden 2003). But surely some women do, in fact, enjoy sex and the myriad other ways in which their sexuality might be expressed (Muhanguzi 2015: 64, 66-67; Tamale

2005: 21-29).[4] In the workshop, Natasha KHadijjah suggested another interpretation. 'She knows from the beginning that this is not a family member. This is the guy, and she is aware of his arms, and then she takes everything off knowingly and she gets inside the bed. Sounds a lot like […] just a happy sexual act between two people.'

the whiskers on that old woman and the sharp beak on her, it wouldn't have been everyone who could tell us apart. The world was old then and the wild animals had thinned out with the trees

Performers might use the moment of telling folktales to challenge or subvert assumptions about gender roles in subtle ways (Kabaji 2009: 137-144). Yet this is unlikely to be recorded: for the most part, written versions of Ugandan orature are presented in English and make no reference to the original languages or performance contexts (Mushengyezi 2013: xvii-xxii; cf. Okot 1974: ix and 1978: xi-xv). In the workshop, a number of participants noted that English translations of Ugandan foktales – even those by Ugandan scholars – make linguistic choices that reinforce colonial constructions of traditional culture; for example, using the word 'witchdoctor' instead of 'diviner,' even though such people were neither witches nor doctors. Other words lose meaning in translation; for example, the word 'ogre' implies something that is not human, but the Achioli word *obibi* represents a monster that can also be a person; that is, a shapeshifter.[5] Comparably, the wolf in Red Riding Hood is associated with belief in werewolves; oral versions were frequently found in places where werewolf trials (against men, much as women were accused of witchcraft) were most common in preceding centuries (Orenstein 2002: 96-103; Zipes 1993: 18-20, 67-75). Marina Warner associates the wolf – akin to witch or werewolf – with marginal knowledge and pagan secrets, and argues that

[4] Stella Nyanzi proposes a broad definition of sexuality that goes beyond who women want to have sex with to include: 'desire, the erotic, emotions, sensuality, fantasy, intimacy, commitment, power, relationship, negotiation, exploration, exploitation, expression, trust, personhood, belonging, identity, pleasure, entertainment, consumption, obligation, transaction, dependence, work, income, resistance, abuse, masculine entitlement, feminine propriety, respectability, spirituality, custom and ritual' (2011: 48).
[5] Like the wolf in Red Riding Hood, some stories associate *obibi* with the rapist (Porter 2017: 217-219).

the reference to the wolf's mouth draws attention to orality, to language or oral knowledge (Warner 1995: 181-182). Such knowledge has all too often been lost.[6]

cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmad only be half blinded

cad … adhmad: what will we do from now on without trees; from a traditional lament for the disappearance of Irish woods and the passing of the Gaelic order (cf. Ní Dhomhnaill 2005: 21-22). Native forest is wild and unmanaged; in many oral versions of Red Riding Hood, Red is seen to be part of this anarchic system, able to defend herself. In the Grimm version, the huntsman, representing a new State authority over the forest, rescues her instead (Zipes 1993: 34-36). Some Ugandan ogre stories warn about the dangers of the forest, others about the dangers of home, but almost all have family or community members – mothers, fathers, siblings, the elderly, disabled people – come to the rescue. This reflects the reciprocity and interdependence that Tamale associates with the tradition of *Ubuntu*: a lived experience of relationality – understanding the individual 'as an inherently-communal being, embedded in social relationships' – that is reflected in people's everyday lives, as well as being elaborated in African philosophy (Tamale 2020: 221-234).

As compared to abstracted treaty rights, Tamale points to *Ubuntu* as a familiar, anchoring idea – expressed in proverbs, riddles, folktales, cultural institutions, and other forms – that can be 'strategically deployed to operationalize gender justice' (2020: 229-230). This familiar ideology or epistemological paradigm 'can act as a springboard for launching counter-narratives regarding gender hierarchies […] It is a unifying motif to address inequities and violations in our societies.' This offers a better response to intersectional differences and oppressions, Tamale argues, than liberal conceptions of human rights and gender equality (2020: 187-233). In discussing solidarity, Tamale focuses on pan-African struggles and does not directly consider how *Ubuntu* might inform global

[6] Alongside epistemicides associated with dehumanising conquest and enslavement in the long 16th century, Ramón Grosfoguel points to the erasure of knowledge held and transmitted by women burned as witches in Europe (2013: 50-51).

solidarities. But she does suggest that it might be relevant, in citing Ella Shohat to say that our feminisms must respond to the reality of life in globalized transnational spaces 'typified by the global travelling of images, sounds, goods and populations,' in which 'genders, sexualities, races, classes, nations, and even continents exist not as hermetically sealed entities but, rather, as part of a set of permeable, interwoven relationships' (Shohat 2001: 1269, cited in Tamale 2020: 58). A truly relational analysis, Shohat suggests, takes account of contradictions and conflictual positioning. 'We must look for ways in which our variegated pasts and presents parallel and intersect, overlap and contradict, and analogize and allegorize one another to place contested perspectives in dialogical relation within, between and among cultures, ethnicities and nations' (Shohat 2001: 1272). Storytelling is ideally suited to this kind of contested interaction. In the workshop, Dilman Dila described how African storytelling involves not just one form of narration by a single storyteller, but performance: 'there's song, there's dancing […] a festive, like a celebratory kind of thing.' He remembers sitting in the kitchen as a child: 'someone begins a story and then the other person says: no, no, no, that's not what happened […] at the end of the day, like three people have told that story!'

The girl brushed bloody crumbs off her lip and smiled.

One trope that the Perrault and Grimm versions of Red Riding Hood excised was that of the wolf directing Red to find, sometimes cook, and consume her grandmother's flesh and blood (Verdier 1997: 108-110; Zipes 1993: 4, 24). Comparably, the protagonist of one Irish story, on finding her father dead after battle, drinks his blood and subsequently roams the wilds, killing and eating those she meets, before being tamed by way of a sex game with a harpist (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005: 48-49, 57-58, 80-83). Ní Dhomhnaill accessed this and other old Irish stories and songs from records in Irish language archives (2005: 17-19, 84). In contrast, just as the Red Riding Hood we know is shaped by the Perrault and Grimm versions, the versions of traditional Irish stories I encountered at school are shaped by the preferences and prejudices of influential collectors of folklore. Lady Augusta Gregory, for instance, constructed her local informants as 'pure-minded and unpolitical' when they might have been anything but (Mattar 2004: 220-224, 235-236). Sinéad Mattar argues that Lady Gregory's

version of the tragic Irish love story Deirdre and Naoise 'played down the untamed female sexuality that was so important to the older versions of the myth,' and omitted an incident in which Deirdre drinks Naoise's blood after his death (2004: 181, 223).

Naoise's hair black as the wing of the bird, skin white as the snow underfoot and lips bitten red raw bright as the blood it feasted on.

For workshop participants, the reference to Naoise's skin and blood-red lips seems to have prompted an association with the story of Snow White. Amanda said, 'I actually remember all the white, the white folktales. Cinderella. Beautiful Rapunzel. Snow White. […] There were exciting images, you would literally actually look at the book because of the images.' Dilman described how the film and publishing industries seek to appeal to certain audiences, 'so it has to be a blue-eyed girl with blond hair and what.' '*The Bluest Eye*,' said Hilda Twongyeire, nodding to Toni Morrison's book. 'The whitest skin,' said another participant, 'skin as white as snow, and lips as red as blood.' 'I watch some of these Disney movies,' Caroline Nalule said, 'I can't believe I watched this as a kid and I thought this was ok. I feel like as you get older, you cannot just deceive yourself and say: it's just a story. No. There are certain things that you begin to see. […] One way or other you will become aware that: um, something here is not right.'

If I wasn't careful the girl would start roaring crying again over her own lost love, long since off on his travels looking for gold in France.

In the Irish song *Siúil a rún*, the singer's absent lover has gone to France to become a mercenary, emigrating, as Irish people have long done and continue to do, in search of economic opportunity. While Ireland was colonised by the British, Irish people, as mercenaries, merchants and – especially – missionaries were also complicit in the colonial project. Even as neglected elements from Irish traditions might contribute to re-membering the story of Red Riding Hood, my obvious association with the development industry colours this contribution and risks reinforcing coloniality. I have tried

to discuss and invite critiques of my positionality on a number of occasions in Uganda, but my interlocutors have often responded by playing down differences and reassuring me about the relatively equitable nature of our interactions. Approaching these issues indirectly, through storytelling, seemed to allow for more pointed engagement with and critique of my position. Some readers questioned the relevance and relatability of my story, preferring to emphasise Ugandan references and traditions, while others – as noted above – associated the story with problematic cultural references which they went on to critique. Others defended the value and relevance of reading stories together that engage cultural references from elsewhere. This facilitated critical reflection that might have been more difficult – for me and for my interlocutors alike – in a more direct discussion.

She dumped the child on my bed, and it promptly shat in its pants, filling the room with a stench almost as rank as my own. I've let people go for less before.

Many oral versions of Red Riding Hood emphasise Red's cunning in tricking the wolf and saving herself. One common trope is that she threatens to urinate or defecate in the bed; in horror the wolf lets her go outside through the window and she escapes, sometimes accompanied by her siblings (Verdier 1997: 103; Zipes 1993: 1-5, 23). In the workshop some participants compared the Soga ogre story Mudo that I gave them to read (Tibasiima 2013: 176-181) with the story of Nsangi from Buganda. In both stories a young girl is hidden away by her parents, but an ogre tricks her into opening the door to him and eats her. In the version of Nsangi that Natasha was told, 'it is the mother who goes looking for the beast,' cleverly tempting the ogre with a delicious meal in order to rescue her daughter. In contrast, in the version of Mudo we read together, the father rescues the girl, with help from the same 'medicine man' who helped the ogre trick her (Tibasiima 2013: 180-181).[7] These differences suggest a tension between matriarchal and patriarchal traditions in stories from different parts of Uganda – and in different versions of those stories. But Dilman and Natasha were particularly taken with how adults were the heroes – in contrast to oral versions of Red Riding Hood, Natasha

[7] In the version of Nsangi collected by Dipio and Sillars, her mother consults a 'witchdoctor,' who gives her a magic stick to hit the ogres with (Dipio and Sillars 2012: 254).

pointed out, children in these stories were always victims. Their discussion did not so much reject interdependence in favour of a European individualism, as explore the hierarchies and limitations of how the relational embeddedness associated with *Ubuntu* has been articulated in certain traditional stories. Alternative articulations can be found in other traditions. For instance, Dilman compared Mudo with the Achioli story of Awili in which it is the girl's sister or brother who kills the monster she unwittingly marries, not her parents.[8]

'Get up love and get the door and let me into the house if you're not up already; and here's a bottle for yourself and I hope you don't refuse me your daughter after all that.'

With this translation of the troubling refrain of the Irish love song *Éirigh suas a stóirín*, my story cycles back onto itself and begins to repeat, with a slight shift in emphasis and new interpretative possibilities. Shame, abuse – by the religious, in institutional homes, of single mothers – and control of women's bodies are writ large in Ireland's recent past (Fischer 2016 and 2020). More recently, discursive shifts associated with the legalisation of abortion may have created an environment more conducive to discussions about women's sexuality. For instance, a recent review of sexuality and relationships education in Ireland shows that there is appetite for moving away from an approach emphasising risk and danger towards a more positive exploration of sexuality in schools (NCCA 2019: 18-19, 50, 64). Perhaps there is potential for traditional narratives about sexuality to cycle back and begin to change, allowing for a more subtle and playful exploration of what gives different women pleasure and the myriad and diverse ways in which women's sexuality might be expressed.

Siúil, siúil, siúil a rún,
Siúil go sochair agus siúil go ciúin,
Siúil go doras agus éalaigh liom.
Is go dté tú mo mhúirnín slán.

[8] Cf. Dipio and Sillars 2012: 229-234. Dilman emphasised that there are multiple different versions of this story, with key details changing from village to village.

Siúil … slán: go (walk), go, go my love / go peacefully and go quietly / go to the door and escape (elope) with me / and may you go safely my darling.

Conclusion

Despite or perhaps even because of their troubling and ambiguous nature, stories like Red Riding Hood can be drawn upon in negotiating how women's rights are described and promoted and in negotiating transnational solidarities. In its multiple versions, the story speaks to debates about sexual violence and female sexuality and agency. Translocating the story into an Irish context and comparing this with Ugandan storytelling traditions highlights parallels and disjunctures between the Red Riding Hood tradition and analogous traditions in Ireland and in Uganda. This tries to engage culture 'as an arena for political and ideological struggle,' to negotiate with and around patriarchy, unequal power relations, and cultural difference (Nnaemeka 2004: 360, 374, 378). Cultural traditions, whether dominant or marginalised, are complex and dynamic; their meanings are not fixed, but can be mobilised towards different ends. 'Stories,' Natasha said, 'are different than laws, for example, because they still allow for somebody else to understand what they want from it and they don't tell it fully. […] If you hear that story, you'd be like: oh, I kind of get it. Then when it happens to you, you still have a moment to add your own agency.'

The effect of such storytelling practices may not be immediate, but may emerge after the audience has puzzled over and revisited the stories they heard. In the workshop, one participant thought my story was 'something I can read for a long time and get bits from different paragraphs.' Another participant said, 'I didn't understand everything while you were reading, but just what I liked was […] the music, the tone, OK, things were flowing.' But for Dilman there was a point when he got lost and 'somehow, switched off.' Storytelling as a practice can make space for refusal as well as mutual recognition. In her recent article 'Against Collaboration,' Grace Musila wonders what would happen if the 'native,' as she puts it, simply wandered off (2019: 292):

> What would emerge out of these projects if, rather than being encouraged to adopt the registers and theories legitimised by the Northern academic machinery, they [Africa-based researchers] were encouraged to pursue the questions they deem relevant, on their own terms and in their own registers? How would the texture of the academy change if it was hospitable to these registers and textures, rather than panel-beating them into adopting the monochromatic registers and accents of thought legitimised by the North?
>
> (Musila 2019: 288).

'In order to participate fully in the shaping of knowledge about Africa, African NGOs,' Nnaemeka argues, 'should not hesitate to bite the finger that feeds them' (2004: 368).

Building relationships of solidarity and mutual understanding takes time and involves both understanding and misunderstanding, dialogue and silences. Such relationships may only be partially possible across distances of geography and privilege. My position in this work is unstable – recognising the erasures inscribed by the unmarked messenger of 'Southern' perspectives, I try to speak from a more thoroughly grounded position, drawing attention to some of the cultural references that shape me and my encounters with others (cf. Azumah Dennis 2020; Puwar 2020). In doing so I acknowledge the very real possibility that my own perspectives might not be relevant. My sense, though, is that speaking from this culturally-situated position is more honest than speaking from the position of observer and messenger, even as it exposes me to resistance and refusals – and that even these might be enriching and transformative encounters. Telling and retelling ambiguous stories like Red Riding Hood – re-membering widely shared epistemic resources in a way that engages diverse and locally specific cultural traditions – can create space to consider where we come from and what we desire, and how those desires might be engaged through or might influence relationships of solidarity. Such stories have the potential to do this at the same time as they prompt outrage on behalf of the other – and on behalf of ourselves.

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