

# Introduction to Gender, Sexuality, and Intersectionality in Irish Studies

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This issue of *Breac* has been in the works for a while now, and as we think back over the events that have happened during this time period, we're struck by how salient gender has been in a number of the big stories. One that comes to mind was the work of Marriage Equality, including the "Sinéad's Hand" ad, and their campaign to secure marriage equality; on May 22, 2015, the referendum passed to add the thirty-fourth amendment to the Constitution of Ireland, and Ireland became the first nation to guarantee marriage equality by legislation (as opposed to by judicial decree). More recently, the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home at Tuam has reentered the news.

All of this serves to remind us how questions of gender and sexuality continue to possess a vexed and complex history in Ireland and remain paramount to our understandings of our contemporary situation. Following the seismic shift in attitudes to sexuality that the victorious 2015 Marriage Equality Referendum represented, it is tempting to think of these difficult and controversial questions as finally resolved, allowing Ireland to discard its controversial, conservative past and redefine itself as a progressive, liberal nation state that can now offer global leadership on questions of equality and social justice.<sup>[1]</sup> This was very much the character of the post-Marriage Equality analysis with national and international commentators quick to proclaim the referendum result as a "victory"<sup>[2]</sup> for the forces of social liberalization, a "defeat"<sup>[3]</sup> for the Catholic Church and its once dominant hegemonic position in Irish society, and declaring Ireland to be at the "vanguard of social change"<sup>[4]</sup> internationally. These views appeared confirmed when two months later, Ireland became only the fourth country in the world to enshrine in law the right to gender recognition based on self-declaration.<sup>[5]</sup>

It is certainly correct to argue that the Marriage Equality result was a significant challenge to the forces of social conservatism that were so central to the foundation and development of the Irish state.<sup>[6]</sup> The referendum involved amending the sections on marriage and the family of the Irish Constitution (a deeply conservative document authored by Ireland's founding patriarchs Eamon de Valera and Archbishop John Charles McQuaid). Marriage enjoys a privileged position in the constitution which envisages a gendered family, exclusively based on heterosexual marriage, with the "special" role of women within the private home formally elevated as an ideal.<sup>[7]</sup> We now know that this vision of the stable "happy" traditional family so beloved by Catholic Ireland rested upon on a brutal religious and state system of containment and oppression where women who failed to conform and their children were considered, with the full with the knowledge and complicity of the State, little more than commodities for trade amongst religious orders.

As this special issue of *Breac* is published, the present day realities of Ireland's painful past are once again thrown into sharp relief with the confirmation by the Commission on Mother and Baby Homes that a significant number of babies and infants up to three years of age,

probably in their hundreds, were found buried in a septic tank in Tuam, Co. Galway. The story only came to light because of the painstaking work by local historian Catherine Coreless.<sup>[8]</sup> One of the reasons these revelations continue to reverberate so strongly into the present is that, for significant sections of society, the past is not over, as their stories have yet to be told or even acknowledged. Ireland's Magdalene Asylums may have been disbanded, but they have been replaced by a similar system of containment—direct provision—a system that leaves asylum seekers fleeing torture, poverty, and persecution languishing for years.<sup>[9]</sup> The continued presence of a Constitutional prohibition on abortion—the Eighth Amendment—has resulted in women being denied access to even basic bodily autonomy when pregnant as well as in the death in 2012 of Savita Halappanavar.<sup>[10]</sup> The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) just recently (again) criticized the Irish State for its failure “to establish an independent, thorough and effective investigation, in line with international standards, into all allegations of abuse, ill-treatment or neglect of women and children in the Magdalene laundries in order to establish the role of the State and church in the perpetration of alleged violations.”<sup>[11]</sup> Not only is Ireland's past far from past, gender continues to be the thread that weaves together past and present.

When we issued the CFP, we sought contributions that considered issues of gender and/or sexuality, broadly defined, with a particular interest in papers that engage with intersectionality or interrogate the impact of biopolitics on everyday life. We suggested as possible topics ethics of sex reassignment; trans\* issues; LGBTQ concerns; sex workers; reproductive rights; Savita Halappanavar's death and other interrogations of abortion politics; responses to abuse revelations; and secret adoptions, without respect to disciplinary field. It's striking to us, in considering the submissions we received, how heavily over-represented literary analysis is. This is not to suggest that historians, social scientists, and others are not doing critical work on gender issues. But rather, it seems to point to the ways that Irish issues have long been most easily (and perhaps most productively) discussed through the slant of literature. As Angela Bourke has noted,

Fairies belong to the margins, and so can serve as reference points and metaphors for all that is marginal in human life. Their mostly underground existence allows them to stand for the unconscious, for the secret, or the unspeakable, and their constant eavesdropping explains the need sometimes to speak in riddles, or to avoid discussion of certain topics.<sup>[12]</sup>

Hence, the “open secret,” so prevalent in Irish culture, most notable for our purposes being the secret of gender—and hence, the appropriate nature of literature as a form through which to explore the impact of gender.

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<sup>[1]</sup> The Marriage Equality referendum was passed by 62% of the electorate based on a 60.52% turnout. See “Same-sex Marriage Referendum,” *Irish Times*, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/marriage-referendum>.

<sup>[2]</sup> Fintan O'Toole, “Ireland has left ‘tolerance’ far behind,” *Irish Times*, May 23, 2015, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/fintan-o-toole-ireland-has-left-tolerance-far-behind-1.2223838>

[3] Patsy McGarry, "Same-sex marriage vote an 'unmitigated disaster' for Church," *Irish Times* 25 May 2015. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/same-sex-marriage-vote-an-unmitigated-disaster-for-church-1.2225680>.

[4] Danny Hakim and Douglas Dalby, "Ireland Votes to Approve Gay Marriage, Putting Country in Vanguard," *New York Times*, May 23, 2015. [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/world/europe/ireland-gay-marriage-referendum.html?\\_r=2](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/world/europe/ireland-gay-marriage-referendum.html?_r=2).

[5] See the Oireachtas, "Gender Recognition Act 2015," <http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/2015/a2515.pdf>

[6] For an in-depth analysis of the complex achievement of the same-sex marriage referendum in Ireland, see Anne Mulhall, "The Republic of Love," *Bully Bloggers*, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/06/20/the-republic-of-love/>.

[7] See Dermot Keogh, "The Catholic Church and the writing of the 1937 Constitution," *History Ireland* 13, no. 3 (2005), <http://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/the-catholic-church-and-the-writing-of-the-1937-constitution/>.

[8] Nora-Ide McAuliffe, "Tuam mother and baby home: Names of the 796 children who died," *Irish Times*, March 13, 2017, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/tuam-mother-and-baby-home-names-of-the-796-children-who-died-1.3008263>.

[9] See the *Irish Times* series on life inside Ireland's direct provision system for asylum seekers; Carl O'Brien, et. al., "Lives in Limbo," <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/lives-in-limbo>.

[10] Kitty Holland, *Savita: The Tragedy That Shook a Nation* (Dublin: Transworld, 2013).

[11] Kitty Holland, "Mother and baby homes investigation too narrow, says UN," *Irish Times*, March 6, 2017, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/mother-and-baby-homes-investigation-too-narrow-says-un-1.3000124>.

[12] Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 32.

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