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Gendered Relations of Power in Ireland's Same-Sex Marriage Referendum<sup>1</sup>:  
Panti Bliss and the Lesbians Caught in the "Crossfire"<sup>2</sup>

In her book *Gender in Real Time: Power and Transience in a Visual Age* (2002) in a chapter titled "Do Clothes Make the Woman?: Performing in and out of Industrial Time," anthropologist Kath Weston refutes the conception of gender put forth by performance theory during the 1990s in North America. She argues that performance theory, which will be explained below, cannot and does not account for the many complex influences and individual experiences of gender. Ultimately, she argues that gender cannot be distilled down to a neat theory or isolated category as it is inseparably wrapped up in historical relations of race, class, sexuality, religion, desire, commodification, the objectification of the female body, and individual identities and subjective experiences. Through employing Weston's intersectional approach and conducting research firmly situated in the historical development of feminism and lesbian activism and reflective of class, race, and religion in Ireland, I discovered a possible interpretation of the gendered social relations that contributed to the passing of the referendum. Two specific cases, that of lesbian couple Senator Zappone and Dr. Gilligan, and iconic drag queen Panti Bliss, were particularly revealing of these social relations. In her attempt to draw conclusions about gendered behavior in her chapter, Weston writes, "Although the meaning of dress and dance, invitation and stance at the prom [the event she analyzed] was never fixed, the range of possible interpretations emerged from historically conditioned relations of power..." (Weston: 2002, 80). She recognized that though she couldn't make any generalizable statements about the meaning of gender due to its inherent social and historical complexity, she could delve into individual and group

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<sup>1</sup> On May 22nd, 2015, citizens of Ireland passed a referendum legalizing same-sex marriage with a 62.1% popular vote. Ireland was the first country to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote.

<sup>2</sup> See Bliss 2015.

experiences of gender through observation and analysis contextualized by specific histories of power relations. Similarly, in my research, my aim was to situate the passing of Ireland's same-sex marriage referendum within its larger historical context, and use the two specific cases I mentioned as lenses through which to offer an interpretation of gendered power relations that is specific to histories of class, race, patriarchy, religion, and commodification in Ireland. In my analysis, which is rooted in Weston's intersectional feminist theory, I argue that if it weren't for white men, albeit gay, the referendum would not have passed; though the results hugely benefit queer women, it is another event in Irish history of a male-dominated struggle for social and political power.

To elucidate this conclusion I will first break down performance theory of the 90s that Weston heavily refutes and synthesizes Weston's own intersectional feminist theory. In a nutshell, performance theory of the 1990s, which was made popular by iconic scholars such as Judith Butler, suggests that "the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without origin" (Butler 1999: 175). This theory supposes that gender is created through repetitions of actions and visual clues that come to be understood as essential to the self when in reality they are nothing more than an act. Performance theorists emphasized drag and other forms of gender play such as butch/femme lesbian relationships as subversive acts that reveal the falsity of an essential masculinity or femininity. Kath Weston argues against this theory through a detailed and humorous ethnography of "Prom Nite," a lesbian prom held in San Francisco, California in 1985. She argues that gender, its history, and lived implications, cannot be adequately accounted for when it is conceptualized only as a set of mannerisms and actions learned through socialization. Gender, she pushes, is inextricably wrapped up in all social relations and cannot be understood without taking into account the specific social relations of a given time and place.

In addition to the wider historical context and specific social relations, Weston argues that individual's experiences of their gender as a part of their identity must be accounted for. In addressing this subjectivity that was negated in performance theory Weston writes:

In the rush to "prove" that lesbians want to be men, then that lesbians are just as feminine as heterosexual women, and more recently that the practice of butch/femme offers a revolutionary subject position capable of subverting oppressive gender relations, analysts have paid little attention to how queer women themselves have interpreted gender in their relationships (Weston 2002: 61).

She turns to the women at "Prom Nite" to ask them how they personally experience gender. Many women express that gender is something essential to their identity. Weston quotes a woman named Vicki Turner who comments on her past roommate's butch aesthetic:

She's worn skirts and things like that. But I couldn't see her in these [gestures at spandex pants] and carrying it off to be really this ultra-Jessica Rabbit kind of thing. Sorry, girlfriend! It's like me being the daddy butch. They'd look at my and go, 'Sorry, hon. You just don't have it' (Weston 70).

In analyzing this statement Weston writes, "Drawing on notions of fit and coherence, some women claimed that wearing any outfit can feel like putting on drag if it's not 'right for you.'" This shows that though the presentation of gender can be manipulated in a material way, many women at "Prom Nite" experience gender as a core facet of themselves that when altered no longer feels genuine. These subjective revelations complicate the definition of gender asserted by performance theorists of the 90s and demand an understanding of gender that can account for both its wider sociopolitical context and subjective lived experience.

To account for the historical, social, and political implications of gender at "Prom Nite," Weston takes into account the various life histories of the women present; she notes that other aspects of their social identity such as their race, class, and sexual orientation influence the way they enact and

experience gender. In a humorous passage that illustrates the futility of the search for a concrete explanation of gender's origin Weston writes:

Was her "choice" dictated by income, or was she trying to take her presentation to another level of sleaze? In which case the historical consolidation of whiteness, the resignification of leather products from rural self-sufficiency to urban avant-garde, the global reorganization of the fashion industry, the styles her mama wore, and thirty years of bad-girl movies might have to be taken into account (Weston 81).

Trying to understand the role gender plays in even one individual's life can be a daunting task.

In addition to mentioning race and class in the quote above, Weston points to the importance of accounting for histories of commodification and material development when trying to make sense of gender. While critiquing performance theory of the 1990s in this light she argues:

In a material world, bodies are not passively inscribed by signs; they are inscribed by people who select and reconfigure items of material culture from a restricted range of options, displaying them to imaginations that are shaped by historical developments... In a material world, the individuals performing gender are never identically positioned with respect to relations of power" (Weston 76-77).

As specific material objects that signify gender are mass-produced and circulate as commodities, one must consider their accessibility based on privilege and income, their racial connotations, and any other significations they might carry in order to accomplish an intersectional contextualization of gender. For example, a certain purse might signify "woman," a particular time period, a certain level of income, and a racial stereotype all at once.

Given all of the complexities of gender that Weston elucidates in her ethnography of "Prom Nite," I turn to my own analysis of the passing of Ireland's same-sex marriage referendum. To make a claim about the stakes behind the same-sex marriage referendum, the agency of various parties involved in the vote, and the media coverage following the event, I employ Weston's intersectional approach to understanding gender. Through a consideration of the history of the lesbian movement in Ireland and

the media coverage given to lesbian couple Ann Louise Gilligan and Katherine Zappone and drag queen Panti Bliss, I exemplify the complexity of the social and lived experience of gender as put forth by Weston. Simultaneously, I argue that, based on the historical context of gendered relations of power in Ireland, the same-sex marriage referendum would not have passed if it had not benefitted men, albeit gay.

In an article titled *Lesbian Feminism in Ireland* (1988), Joni Crone discusses the deeply rooted misogyny in Irish culture and documents the evolution of feminist and lesbian movements. The women's liberation movement, which fought for rights to contraception, women's housing, and representation in Irish government, gained momentum in the 1970s. A radical lesbian feminist group that broke off in 1975 caused a rift in the women's movement because they separated from straight women who were concerned about offending Catholic bishops with issues of homosexuality (Crone 344). Lesbian radicals joined the gay movement because, according to Crone, gay men had more money and could afford to use public phones to advertise events that weren't allowed to be published in newspapers (Crone 345). Though lesbians fought to decriminalize male homosexuality in 1993, gay men, for the most part, did not reciprocate the action during lesbian and feminist campaigns for rights to abortion and divorce in the 1980s, which failed due to another split of the lesbian and feminist communities (Crone 345-346). The failure of these campaigns resulted in more discord within communities of activist women and escalated tension within the LGBTQ community as a whole. Though the Protestant North and Catholic South vehemently opposed one another on almost all political issues, they cooperated enthusiastically to oppose any homosexual law reform (Crone 345). Even within the LGBTQ movement, the sexist affects of patriarchy were rampant.

Documentation of the same-sex marriage referendum event reveals a multitude of ways in which gender, and its inextricable relationship with race, class, and histories of commodification, influenced individual's agency and visibility before and after the vote. To account for everything would be impossible, thus for the remainder of this analysis I turn to couple Ann Louise Gilligan and Katherine Zappone and popular Irish drag queen Panti Bliss. I chose the lesbian couple because their proposal, which took place May 23rd, 2015, is one of the only lesbian proposals documented following the passing of the referendum and I chose Panti Bliss as he is currently one of the most publicized members of the LGBTQ community in Ireland.

The publicity of Ann Louise Gilligan and Katherine Zappone's intended marriage, which was one of few televised lesbian proposals alongside multitudes of proposals between men, reveals various possible interpretations of intersectional gender, class, and race relations in contemporary Ireland. Ann Louise Gilligan, a former nun and renowned doctor of theology at St. Patrick's college, and Katherine Zappone, a respected Irish senator born in the United States, gained international recognition in an Irish court case titled *Zappone and Gilligan v. Revenue Commissioners* in 2003 in which they fought to have their Canadian marriage recognized in Ireland. The visibility of their case helped to spur the next ten years of debates about same-sex marriage ("Senator Katherine Zappone").

**Figure 1. Senator Zappone (Left) and Dr. Gilligan (Right) (The Daily Edge. 2015.)**

Zappone as a senator, and Gilligan as a doctor of theology, occupy social positions that are not traditionally held by women in Irish society. A possible interpretation of their unique visibility in comparison to other lesbian couples could be attributed to the fact that they hold roles which have traditionally only been available to men. In a book titled *An Irish Working Class Explorations in Political and Economy and Hegemony, 1800-1950* (2001), Canadian anthropologist M. Silverman notes that

historically Irish women have been invisible in politics and status-worthy working environments.

Women were excluded from the political, economic, and religious domains, all of which continue to be inseparably linked (Silverman 498). As a senator and academic, Zappone and Gilligan may have received unusual publicity due to the prestige of their social roles—roles that were historically occupied by men.

The couple's visibility, in a traditionally misogynistic and homophobic society, could also be attributed to their relationship to systems of power due to their race. It takes only a Google search of images of the same-sex marriage event to realize that almost one hundred percent of the people present appear to be white. The following photo continually pops up and can be linked to various prominent news sources:

**Figure 2. A display of the relatively homogenous whiteness at the same-sex marriage event (CBC news. May 23, 2015)**

Race relations in Ireland, however, can be deceiving. Steve Garner points us towards the subtlety and complexity of Irish race relations in his chapter “Reflections on Race in Contemporary Ireland” in the book *Race and Immigration in the New Ireland* (2013). Though a staggering ninety four percent of the population is noted as white as of 2013, there is a multi-layered history of discrimination and racism against “white others” (Garner 193). Garner brings to light the subjugation of Irish people during British colonization, and the outdated English view that Irish culture is backwards and in need of modernization. The Irish are not, however, free of their own history of perpetuating racial oppression. The Irish government has continually fought to subjugate an indigenous group known as the Travellers through criminalizing their nomadic lifestyle (Garner, 184). In addition to these local antagonisms Garner illuminates the commonly present anti-black, anti-refugee, anti-immigrant, and

anti-Semitic attitudes. In concluding his chapter Garner writes, “There is no simple monolithic interpretation of these [Irish racial] experiences. The complexity should alert the reader to the error of consigning the Irish, en mass, to the position of either solely victim of racism or solely perpetrator. Many have found themselves simultaneously in both roles” (Garner 196).

This racial history complicates any assertions one might make about race at the same-sex marriage referendum celebrations, except to say that people of color, particularly black individuals, were not visibly represented. Dr. Gilligan does not disclose her individual racial history, and though Senator Zappone is most likely white American as she was born in Washington state, she does not disclose her racial identity either. Due to a lack of coverage on racialization of “white others” during the celebration and campaign process, it’s difficult to conclude anything for certain about the racial components of gendered relations at the event. It’s probably safe to say, however, that Dr. Gilligan and Senator Zappone gained some amount of visibility due to their perceived race and elevated social status, even though societal misogyny and homophobia were stacked against them. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to interview them personally to inquire about their subjective experiences of gender in relation to the passing of the referendum.

Media coverage given to Iconic Irish drag queen Panti Bliss brings attention back to Weston’s argument against performances theory’s assertion that drag shows that gender is simply an act with no core of identity. Panti Bliss, also known as Rory O’Neill, was spotlighted in various news articles and interviews on the day the referendum passed as well as in the months leading up to it. In line with performance of the 90s, Judith Butler might argue that Bliss is a subversive character that disrupts the idea that gender is an essential part of identity, showing that gender can be assembled through costumes and the adoption of mannerisms. In taking into account Bliss’ larger social context,



specifically his role as a male in a culture of pervasive patriarchy and the history of the material commodification of femininity evident in his drag costume, I argue that more is at stake.

In an article titled *Where are all the female drag kings?* (2015), Caomhan Keane distinguishes between the prominence of drag kings and queens in Ireland. She writes, “and while there are 50 drag queens in Dublin, the number of ‘kings’ is limited to perhaps four who work regularly.” She continues, “a drag queen can walk on stage in fabulous clothing and make-up, and the transformation itself is enough to make her worthy of applause. For kings, the transformation is not as impressive. It’s less about the aesthetic and more about embodying the gender” (page not specified). This observation points out gendered relations of power through highlighting the prominence of queens over kings and hints at the history of commodification of femininity. If male-identifying queens dominate the public eye, as they often do, one must look beyond drag as a tool of radical subversion. Weston writes, “...radical potential cannot be evaluated apart from specific historical and material contexts. To destabilize is not always to subvert” (Weston 81). Within Ireland’s history of male supremacy, it is doubtful that the public attention given to Panti Bliss is as subversive and radical in regards to gender as Butler would have hoped. Though his persona may reveal certain performative aspects of gender, it is a further example of power being given to yet another man, gay or otherwise. Though Bliss acts and dresses as a woman his male social privilege remains. Weston’s focus on material context is pinpointed specifically by Keane’s reference to the clothing and makeup available to drag queens to perform femininity. As displayed by the following photos, products that indicate femininity are generally more abundantly commodified than those that signify masculinity:

**Figure 3. Panti Bliss ("Interview: Panti Bliss" 2015) and Rory O’Neill (Attwood 2015)**

Panti Bliss' persona is constructed with makeup, hair products, earrings, and stylized clothing, whereas Rory O'Neill sports a simple haircut and a button-down shirt. This example of the commodification of femininity can be contextualized within Ireland's post-industrial capitalist economy, as Weston's analysis of "Prom Nite" is situated in America's post-industrial capitalist economy, and within the wider history of patriarchy and objectification of women's bodies.

In adhering to Weston's commitment to attend to individual's subjective experiences, it can't be negated that Panti Bliss considers himself to be transgressive on the fronts of gender and sexuality. His fans refer to him as Ireland's number one "gender discombobulist" (Bliss 2015). In an interview on *Made Up* (2015) Bliss is quoted saying, "I got into drag in my early twenties and it was fun, it was transgressive, playing with gender and an alternative to the mainstream in many ways. It still has those things I enjoy about it. And the weird thing for me now is I'm an establishment figure - they give me honorary degrees, I open science fairs, and I'm taken so seriously in Ireland now it's totally bizarre" ("Interview: Panti Bliss" 2015). This contradiction drawn between Bliss as an example of patriarchy and Bliss as a transgressive activist figure is something that I argue is a reality of the lived experience of gender. Performance theory of the 90s, which considers the substance of gender to be "an imitation without origin" (Butler 175), would not be able to account for the variety of interpretations of Bliss' role as a gendered person in society. In Weston's words, "... performance theory's restricted focus on process leaves little room for the complexities and contradictions that appear as soon as an event... is firmly located in context" (Weston 73).

Weston would caution against making any general statements about the significance of gender with regard to the passing of the same-sex marriage referendum. She would argue, as she does in her analysis of "Prom Nite," that a contextualized and experience-based analysis reveals "a range of possible

interpretations [that] emerge from historically conditioned relations of power... ” (Weston 80). I argue, however, that in light of gendered power dynamics revealed by the historical context of lesbian women in Ireland, Senator Zappone and Dr. Gilligan’s proposal, and Panti Bliss’ visibility, such an open ended conclusion is insufficient. In a TED talk in Dublin in 2015 prior to the passing of the same-sex marriage referendum, Panti Bliss makes a comment that crudely highlights a persuasive interpretation of the role gender played at the event and leading up to it: “The poor old lesbians just get caught in the homophobic crossfire. Guilty by association” (Bliss 2015). The image of being caught in a “crossfire” poignantly illustrates the position that both straight women and lesbian women have historically occupied in Irish society. Pervasive patriarchy in Ireland at large and within the gay community, the lack of support for referendums aimed at law reform that would specifically benefit women (laws such as legal in-country abortion), and continual rifts within the feminist community due to straight feminist loyalty to the Catholic Church, suggest that the referendum would not have passed had it not benefitted men, albeit gay. It is an example of men, regardless of sexuality, playing out another power struggle, with a result that happens to benefit queer women. With the exception of Dr. Gilligan and Senator Zappone who hold positions in society typically occupied by men, the celebrations following the event largely highlight marriage proposals between men. Panti Bliss, through both his role as an activist on the fronts of gender and sexuality and his inextricable involvement in Ireland’s patriarchal history, exemplifies the contradiction and complexity inherent in lived experiences of gender and gender’s significant social implications. He elucidates the necessity of focusing on histories of commodification and material relations as put forth by Weston.

It must be noted, however, that a large number of women-identified individuals experienced the passing of the same-sex marriage referendum as a moment of celebration and progress, a subjectivity

that Weston would agree is crucial. For many it was a step towards a completely secularized Irish state free of Catholic misogyny and homophobia and a glimmer of hope for future social change. While holding this subjective experience as individual truth, I argue that it does not negate the reality that the passing of the same-sex marriage referendum was another chapter in Irish history of a male-dominated struggle for power, even if the lesbians caught in the “crossfire” happened to benefit. My intention, however, is not to claim that social change isn’t afoot. Given the unprecedented turnout of young Irish voters it’s possible that the referendum’s passing signifies the beginning of a new era; an era that brings greater equity on the fronts of gender and sexuality.

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