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Dragging up the Past: Subversive Performance of Gender and Sexual Identities in Traditional and Contemporary Irish Culture

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This chapter places contemporary drag performance in Ireland within a historical context of dissident, subversive elements of Irish popular culture. The practice of drag, as a performative and political strategy with the potential to disrupt and destabilise fixed gender dichotomies and heteronormative hierarchies of identity, is an international phenomenon associated with the LGBT movement. Drag performance among the LGBT movement in Ireland as explored here serves as a performative practice that queers dominant and intersecting discourses on gender, sexuality and national identity; it also reinflects Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque in a critical engagement with the field of the political. As a practice that draws both on the queer and the carnivalesque, critical drag performance in Ireland both engages with local, national and international cultural politics and also resonates with aspects of traditional Irish popular culture, notably in the context of traditional wake games.

As the campaign for the Referendum on marriage equality gained momentum in Ireland in early 2015, the critical practice of Irish drag gained mainstream national and international attention through the figure of drag queen Panti Bliss and her alter ego, Rory O'Neill, as Panti emerged as the avatar for the campaign for same-sex marriage and LGBT equality in Ireland. The passing of the Referendum on same-sex marriage in May 2015 has been hailed as marking a radical shift in Ireland's social, cultural and political landscape. Not only was the Referendum carried by a large majority, but the distribution

of votes in favour of the Referendum spanned sections of the population which have generally been more socially conservative and might have been expected to return a high proportion of votes against it, including older voters, rural voters and practising Catholics. Similarly unexpected was the broad-based level of support for Panti / O'Neill's calls for equality in the wake of the Pantigate controversy. An examination of the critical drag practice of Panti, and of mainstream reactions to the person and role of Panti Bliss / Rory O'Neill during the Referendum campaign, points to continuities between contemporary and traditional cultural understandings of identity, subjectivity and belonging in Ireland. An exploration of the practice of drag, particularly within the 'Alternative Miss Ireland' contest, and of traditional wake games centred on sexual and erotic themes, identifies both as performative expressions issuing from the margins of Irish popular culture that destabilise dominant understandings of dominant social, gender and sexual subjectivities.

In the decades leading up to the passing of the Referendum on same-sex marriage, LGBT identities had gained a certain degree of acceptance in Irish society. The years preceding and following the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993 saw an increase in the representation of homosexual and non-heteronormative identities in Ireland and a concomitant questioning of dominant definitions of Irish gendered and sexual identities.[1] Representations of trans-identities and characters, located primarily within theatrical and cabaret drag performances produced within the gay community, constituted a significant part of those questionings. Such representations prompted and facilitated a rethinking of fixed categories both of gender and of national identity, given the gendering of national(ist) discourse and its historical relationship to Catholic teaching on sexuality and sexual identity in Ireland.

Historically in Ireland, interrelationships between gender, sexuality and national identity have had broad and profound implications at discursive and concrete levels. From

the late nineteenth century onwards, strands of anti-colonial nationalism inverted yet retained binary, gendered definitions of colonialism, casting itself as the defender and liberator of the mother / goddess from the clutches of a marauding, aggressive, masculine empire. Such intersections between gender, sexuality and nationality ensured the centrality of heteronormativity in the establishment and consolidation of the post-colonial state (Luibhéid 2011, p. 180). Patriarchal, heteronormative structurings of Irish identity were bolstered and complicated by the central role of the Catholic Church in nationalist discourse and in post-independence Irish political and cultural life. While the discourses and practices of the Irish nation-state, as of other post-colonial states, involved a policing and circumscription of female sexuality, the circumscription of Irish male sexuality was evident also, with heterosexuality regulated even within the terms of its only acceptable expression, the context of the family. Sexuality was represented as coterminous with national and religious identity, and subordinate to the strictures of both.

Significant challenges to and weakening of the position of the Catholic Church as a major power bloc within the Irish state, and the increased visibility and acceptance of non-normative gender and sexual identities at discursive and legislative levels, all occurring against the backdrop of the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger from the early 1990s, have prompted changing constructions of national and gender identity in Ireland. Critical analysis, however, cautions against the easy equation of change with unlinear progress towards equality and liberation. Constructions and images of gender during and beyond the Celtic Tiger era have been examined by Debbie Ging, who identifies the rise of post-feminist discourse, the growing popularity of bio-determinist discourses on gender and the growth of an increasingly commercialised mediascape as major factors shaping contemporary understandings and constructions of gender in Ireland. Men and women are represented here as essentially polarised, shaped by a consumerism which targets

gender-specific markets through the "ironic" use of brash gender stereotyping which advertising "both lampoons and simultaneously reaffirms" (Ging 2009, p. 53). Free-market economics and post-feminist culture in Ireland, as elsewhere, have combined to support a neoliberal agenda on gender which, beneath its liberal and progressivist rhetoric, is deeply regressive and potentially coercive (p. 56).

Ging observes that dominant discourse cites the increased visibility of homosexuality as an index of gender equality in a strategic bid to mask heteronormative gender ideologies (p. 69). Notwithstanding the hegemonic aims of such rhetorical strategies, that same visibility has facilitated a growing awareness of and interest in LGBT issues and cultural performances among increasing numbers of straight as well as non-hetero supporters and audiences. Many of the trans-representations and performances issuing from within the LGBT movement offer radical critiques of Irish heteronormativity past and present. The Alternative Miss Ireland pageant (AMI), with Panti as one of its founders and its host from 1997-2012, illustrates the potential of the carnivalesque to critically and politically intervene in discourses on gender, sexuality and national identity in Ireland on a collective level. An alternative beauty contest focused on drag performances, AMI emerged within the LGBT community in the mid-1980s and ran annually as an AIDS charity benefit from 1997 until 2012, drawing increasing audiences from the heterosexual as well as the LGBT communities during its lifetime.

The promotional material for the pageant describes it as

> expanding definitions of beauty through spectacle and gender augmentation. AMI looks for the broadest range of entrants—men, women and anything else—to fuck with ideas of beauty and gender in a tumescent celebration of alternative beauty and performance, of concentrated otherness.[2]

Entrants of various genders and sexual orientations, termed '*cailíns*' ('*cailín*' is the Irish word for girl), competed for the Golden Briquette[3] trophy and the annual title of Alternative Miss Ireland in an evening of drag performances staged in Dublin's Olympia Theatre. From the early 2000s, AMI attracted increasing mainstream publicity and attention, its national and international visibility bolstered through the utilisation of social media.

In its display of parody, subversion and the Bakhtinian grotesque and in its emphasis on laughter, the AMI pageant, like drag performances generally, stands within the realm of the carnivalesque. Judith Butler argues that drag as queer performance works to subvert heteronormativity in parodying the notion of an original or primary gender identity through its play upon the anatomy of performer and the gender being performed, and that drag contests serve as one site of queer contestation where the visibility of the queer body assumes a political value. At such sites of queer contestation, the theatrical is not opposed to the political but instead draws attention to the increasing politicisation *of* theatricality (Butler 1993, p. 233). Some Marxist and feminist scholars contest the political value of drag performances and other queer practices, arguing that they are centred on local activities of performative transgression that do not serve to engage with broader questions of economic, social and political (in)justice.[4] Such perspectives have been legitimately challenged as rendering the cultural politics of sexuality as secondary to the 'real' business of politics.[5] They also neglect to acknowledge that drag performances may serve as examples of performative transgression that engage directly with larger socio-political questions.

The AMI has been host to a huge diversity of entries and performances over its lifetime centred around a broad diversity of themes and subjects, all designed to evoke

laughter and hilarity among audiences. One can speculate whether the location of drag within the language of laughter may be one of the reasons why it is dismissed as operating 'merely' within the sphere of cultural representation rather than within the sphere of substantive political activism. Mikhail Bakhtin writes of the understandings of laughter which came to prominence after the Renaissance, whereby the comical sphere was divorced from serious, substantive or philosophical utterances and observations on matters of significance; that which was important could not be told in the language of laughter (Bakhtin 1984, p. 67). Such understandings contrast sharply with the carnivalesque understanding of laughter, which "has a deep philosophical meaning; it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole ... [T]he world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint" (p. 66). In this context, queer performances engage in a critical form of 'truth-telling' regarding cultural and sociopolitical issues. If the Renaissance carnivalesque involved a temporary and bounded period of licence and inversion, critical contemporary queer performances employ the carnivalesque mode in the service of sustained cultural and political critiques that intersect with other, more conventionalised forms and modes of political activism.

As an illustration of the reinflection of the carnivalesque in a queering of the political, the promotional material for the 2011 Alternative Miss Ireland pageant displays an engagement with contemporaneous political and social issues through a drag performance on the streets of Dublin.[6] Late 2010 and early 2011 witnessed the implementation of some of the austerity measures demanded by the EU / IMF Troika as part of Ireland's bailout programme in the wake of the banking collapse and the financial and political crises that brought the Celtic Tiger crashing to an end in late 2008. Austerity focused on pay cuts within the public sector, on increased taxation of lower and middle

incomes and on cutbacks in government spending, targeted heavily towards cuts in health, education and social welfare. The AMI 2011 promo, entitled "AMI goes Diddly Sci-Fi," describes the scene on O'Connell Street, Dublin's main thoroughfare: "Troubled as they are, people ebb and flow along and down all the streets, plastic bags straining with assorted processed foods and cheap shoes. The mood is trodden, the government rotten." Miss Panti then appears and proceeds to trans-form some of Dublin's iconic buildings and monuments:

> Suddenly, in flashes of green, white and orange light, Panti starts to shoot patriotic lazer-beams out of her false-titties. Zappetta! Zling-ting! Diddly-teeeze! Eeeek-eile! She zaps the GPO—it is transformed into a row of hair curlers. Daniel O'Connell is zleeeked into huge shiny plastic hair dryer. A Luas is electrified into a giant tube of lilac lip-gloss. Then, as if seeking more targets, she turns and starts to march across O'Connell Bridge, making one last turn to zap the Spire into a golden Elnett hairspray can. Panti marches on, stops midway on the bridge, and transforms Liberty Hall, in a burst of green flaring plasma, into a giant red lipstick … Panti-Fem-Bot Lazer-Tits lights up the down-trodden with her patriotic beams of tranny-transformation, rebuilding the cityscape as the metropolis of Alternative Miss Ireland.[7]

In its queering of the genre of retro sci-fi, the AMI 2011 promo is heavily camp and hilariously parodic. Through her transformation of buildings and monuments with symbolic, historical and political importance vis-à-vis the struggle for Irish political independence and social equality, Panti's performance comments on the disjuncture between the discourses of nationalism and the trade union movement and Ireland's

increasing social and economic inequities and perceived political impotence in the face of the current crises. Her targeting of icons and symbols of the Celtic Tiger similarly satirises its rhetoric on Ireland's progress under the operation of neoliberal economics.

While drag performance is by definition subversive of bio-determinist constructions of gender, Miss Panti's trans-formation of Dublin through the utilisation of beauty products and cosmetics aimed at a female market further serves to ironies the gender-coded consumerism held up as the defining element of masculine and feminine identities in contemporary Irish society. The performance is subversive in claiming a place for non-normative gender identities in Ireland through its reconstruction both of Dublin's cityscape and of the Irish genderscape. The piece constructs a space for transgressive gender identities within Ireland's discursive and concrete territories. Panti's remapping of Dublin as queer "territory of belonging" (Fortier 1999, p. 42) is radical in its critique of contemporary heteronormative discourses as marginalising increasing groups within Irish society, situating trans-gressive gender performance within the field of the sociopolitical.

The increased visibility and popularity of transgressive gender performance, most notably through the medium of drag, can offer a radical critique of gendered formations of Irishness. If, as Butler (1999, p. 176) has observed, drag parodically imitates the myth of originality, offering an occasion for laughter in its revelation that gender identity is performative and that "the original" is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one *can* embody, many of the carnivalesque performances of AMI parody myths of originality as they relate both to gender and to national identity in Ireland. Through a queering of dominant historical and contemporary discourses on Irishness and of postfeminist constructions of gender, such drag performances bring together the cultural politics of gender transgression and sexuality and critiques of the politics of

gender, social and economic (in)equality in an Irish context. Such performances serve as examples of queer practice with the potential to prompt broadening sections of Irish society to refigure their readings of and engagements with cultural, political and socio-economic issues in Ireland and beyond.

This potential was borne out in dramatic fashion during the run-up to the Referendum and the emergence of Panti / Rory O'Neill as a central figure within the campaign in the wake of the events which came to be known as 'Pantigate.' In January 2014, O'Neill appeared on RTÉ's *The Saturday Night Show* with Brendan O'Connor where they discussed homophobia. O'Neill described as homophobic some commentary by journalists John Waters and Breda O' Brien, a member of the staunchly Catholic organisation the Iona Institute. Those named threatened both RTÉ and O'Neill with legal action for defamation; RTÉ paid €80,000 in compensation and issued a public apology to those named by O'Neill in the interview.

In February 2014, Pantigave her 'Noble Call' speech at the Abbey Theatre in response to the events surrounding the RTÉ controversy. The 'Noble Call' speeches were a series of speeches given by artists, historians, activists and journalists after the performance of *The Risen People* by James Plunkett.[8] The play, staged to commemorate the Dublin Lockout of 1913, portrays the struggle and solidarity among the oppressed working-class and poor of Dublin during the lockout, and the 'Noble Call' was a series of reflections by various artists, historians, journalists, and activists in response to the mood or the theme of the performance. Panti's speech centred on oppression within Irish society where various straight commentators could discuss and debate whether 'the gay' deserved equal rights or recognition as equal. Her speech referred to the silencing of LGBT voices describing the experience of homophobia, or naming their experiences of discrimination and oppression as homophobic: "In a spectacular and neat Orwellian trick,

it turns out that homosexuals are not the victims of homophobia, but that homophobes are the victims of homophobia" (Bliss 2014). Through commentary and social media, Panti's speech went viral, garnering major national and international media interest and attention, and sparked major debate in Ireland and further afield.

Panti's 'Noble Call' speech, the events which led to it, and the visibility and presence in the media of Panti / Rory O'Neill during the period that followed played a major role in garnering support for the same-sex marriage Referendum. In an extraordinary echo of the promo 'AMI goes Diddly Sci-Fi,' crowds of supporters gathered in the grounds of Dublin Castle, to hear the Referendum result declared, trans-forming Dublin into LGBT territory of belonging as Panti arrived at Dublin Castle to a rapturous reception.

Looking at the Referendum result, where almost 63 percent voted in favour of same-sex marriage, in a distribution that confounded previous voting patterns on social issues (all but one constituency in the country returned a majority in favour), it is not an exaggeration to describe the result as a social revolution. Much analysis of the result and the reasons behind it remains to be done, but it is clear that many factors played a role in the shift in Irish culture, society and politics.[9] Alongside the decline of the Catholic Church as a power bloc in Irish politics, the effects of neoliberal policies which championed individualism and economic progress, the economic crash and the imposition of austerity engendered palpable shifts in public attitudes in recent years. Reactions against the definition of Ireland as an economy rather than a society among many sections of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland have led to a renewed emphasis on the importance of community, equality and social relationships. Such attitudes have fostered recognition of gays and lesbians as equal members of the community. The 'Yes Equality' campaign, a non-political organisation set up to spearhead and co-ordinate the Referendum campaign,

drew and built on greater public awareness of issues of gay equality, placing an emphasis on the personal stories of gay people from all walks of life and those of their families to bring home the message that gay and lesbian people are part of the broader community. 'Yes Equality' took a decision to focus on spokespersons who fell within normative categories rather than on flamboyantly gay personalities, including figures such as David Norris and Panti. Its decision was based on research suggesting that normative figures would be better received by the mainstream public and would reassure those concerned that the structure of society would be radically altered by the passing of same-sex marriage, an issue of particular concern to men in the 40-65 age group. While it was undoubtedly successful as a strategy to maximise support, Yes Equality's location of same-sex marriage within a normative societal framework and within homonormative structures placed its strategies outside the parameters of a queering of the political.[10] Yet widespread support existed for the decidedly non-heteronormative, non-homonormative Panti / Rory O'Neill amongst broad sections of the Irish population, and not simply among young, urban and LGBT communities. In the wake of her speech in the Abbey and the reaction to it, Panti observed on social media that she found herself occupying the unexpected position of 'national fucking treasure'; in late 2014, Panti / Rory O'Neill was awarded a 'People of the Year' award for her/his contribution to Irish society.[11]

In seeking to analyse the significance of Panti's role and mainstream responses to it, it is important to explore the terms 'queer' and 'queering,' which issued from within the LGBT movement, and were developed within the fields of queer studies and queer theory. The word 'queer,' meaning unusual, peculiar or odd, came to be used in relation to homosexuality, in the nineteenth century, as a pejorative term. 'Gay' was adopted by the homosexual movement as a non-pejorative description, but some within the LGBT movement adopted and appropriated the term 'queer' as a means of challenging

heteronormative discourses and structures that define genders and sexualities in rigid, binary terms and marginalise, exclude and discriminate against LGBT people. Heteronormativity can be defined as "the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality not only coherent—that is, organised as a sexuality—but also privileged" (Berlant and Warner 1998, p. 548). Heteronormativity does not, however, institute a uniform dichotomy of privilege and marginalisation between heterosexuality and homosexuality; various heterosexualities, including those of working-class communities, racial and ethnic minorities and single parents are frequently stigmatised as deviant.[12] Queerness thus holds the potential to challenge heteronormativity as a normalising process that polices not only non-heterosexual genders and sexualities but that intersects with systems of power and exclusion in relation to multiple categories of identity.

The terms 'queer' and 'queering' have varying, and sometimes contested, interpretations, and are utilised as such. Queerness can be understood as concerned with the interrogation of the various operations which constitute gender and of the intersections between the operation of heteronormative gender identities and the broader operation of structures of power. As Cathy Cohen argues:

> For many of us, the label 'queer' symbolizes an acknowledgement that through our existence and everyday survival we embody sustained and multi-sited resistance to systems (based on dominant constructions of race and gender) that seek to normalize our sexuality, exploit our labour, and constrain our visibility. At the intersection of oppression and resistance lies the radical potential of queerness to bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics. (Cohen 2005, p. 24)

Such understandings and interpretations of queerness highlight connections between various forms of marginalisation and exclusion by dominant sociopolitical, cultural and economic systems:

> While initially used only to refer to radical homosexuals, opinions on the range of what queer includes can vary. For some people, the non-specificity of the term is liberating. Queerness thus becomes a means of political resistance against heteronormativity as well as homonormativity while simultaneously refusing to engage in traditional essentialist identity politics. (Anon 2010)

Some critiques levelled against queer theory argue that it projects queerness onto historical texts and practices without due attention to, and acknowledgement of, contemporaneous contexts and subjectivities. Such criticism is not always without justification; in adopting an analysis of historical texts and practices, it is essential that we recognise contemporaneous categories and understandings of sexuality, gender and subjectivity. Bearing this in mind, parallels and continuities can be drawn between contemporary drag practice and mainstream perceptions of drag figure Panti, and practices within traditional popular Irish culture reflective of contemporaneous understandings of subjectivity.

As a starting point for such comparisons, it is salient to look at the term 'queer' / 'quare' in Ireland. One definition echoes the general, traditional meaning of the word as denoting odd, strange or peculiar, but its meaning in Ireland has traditionally been more variegated and complex. It can denote 'very,' as a means of emphasis, and is also used to mean 'great' or 'excellent.' This more complex set of meanings is carried by the

translation of the Irish term '*ait*.' '*Ait*' translates as queer, or odd, but also as great (Ó Dónaill 1998). To tell someone "*Is ait thú*" is to complement them as being great or excellent, a phrase which is found in translation in parts of Ireland as "You're a quare one." At the level of language, a positive connotation is given to the odd, the marginal, the non-normative, something that is of major significance in the context of the relationship between language and the construction of subjectivity. The word '*ait*' would not traditionally have referred specifically to non-normative sexual or gender identities, but such categories might reasonably have been encompassed by the term.

The idea that traditional popular culture in Ireland contained space for the queer / quare which included transgressive performative elements is adroitly illustrated by traditional wake games, vis-à-vis their ludic figurings and refigurings of gender and sexuality. The practice of the wake, essentially a watch or vigil on the occasion of a death, has a long history and remains strong in many parts of Ireland. The wake was (and is) a social occasion, and traditionally took place in the house of the deceased, where the corpse was laid out. Generally lasting for two days, during which time neighbours, friends and relatives would gather and visit, the occasion involved various activities, which included eating, drinking, the use of tobacco and snuff, prayer and keening. If the person being waked had died of natural causes, as opposed to having suffered a tragic or untimely death, the wake was known as a 'merry wake.' Games and entertainment figured large at the merry wake; scholars and folklorists have pointed to connections between wake games and the *cluichí caointe* (games of lamentation) that were held at *óenaigh* (royal fairs) in Gaelic Ireland to honour Irish kings and warriors who had died.[13] Many of these games, containing erotic or sexual themes, and involving trans-vestic elements, served as performative practices which troubled dominant constructions of social and gendered relationships and subjectivities.

Extant accounts of wake games issue mainly from folkloric studies and from commentaries by antiquarians, members of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy and figures within the Catholic Church. Many outsider accounts and commentaries reflect élite and religious denunciation of and opposition to wake practices. Seán Ó Súilleabháin's *Irish Wake Amusements* (1967) documents Catholic Church condemnation and attempted suppression of wake practices from the early seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. Statutes and Pastoral letters issued during this period focus on various elements of the wake, in particular on drinking, obscene songs and stories, music and dancing, keening, "immoral, unchristian behaviour" (including merry behaviour, particularly games), games involving imitation of the sacraments and the presence of single men and/or women not related to the deceased at wakes at night. In a paper published in *Transactions of the Kilkenny Archaeology Society* in 1853, John G.A. Prim gives some general descriptions of the "gross obscenity of the wake orgies," remarking that

> While we must rejoice that customs so revolting to all notions of delicacy and civilization, and so largely calculated to demoralize our people, have been put down, and I trust eradicated, it is yet to be regretted that some record is not likely to be preserved of the main features of observances so curious … [S]o marked are they in every part by the all-pervading licentiousness of Paganism, that to spare the feelings of the modest reader, if written at all, they should be confided to the guardianship of a dead language. (Prim 1853, pp. 334-335)

Both ecclesiastical and élite denunciations of the wake refer to its 'paganism' as an index both of its non-Christian elements and of the sexually licentious potential and nature of the practice, evidenced by the presence and proximity of single men and women and the

nature of many of the games. However, wake practices proved recalcitrant despite strong condemnation by the Catholic Church over a period spanning almost three centuries. As in many traditional societies and cultures, the merry wake undoubtedly served as an important ritual and rite of passage, wherein the symbolisation of sexuality was bound up with fertility and the regeneration of the community in the face of death. In this context, the practice gives insights into the imagination and representation of community and of gendered identities and subjectivities in traditional popular culture in Ireland.

Studies of the practice of the *caoineadh* (lament) or keening draw attention to the role played by women in traditional funerary practices in Ireland. A ritualised form of public lamentation, keening was practised largely by women, often professional keeners. The practice of keening accorded status to the keening woman as central in assisting the deceased to pass into the next life and in performing expressions of grief. The Church was especially vehement in its condemnation of keening as a practice which defied its cosmological and patriarchal authority; there are many accounts of confrontations between the clergy and keening women, involving verbal or physical attacks on the women by clergy members and often evoking counter-verbal attacks by the keeners.

Gearóid Ó Crualaoich's incisive reading of the merry wake posits a structural model in which the keening woman is the agent of the transition of the deceased individual to an afterlife that is ambiguously ancestral and Christian, while the *cleasaidhe* or *borekeen*, the male figure who presides over the wake games and entertainments, serves as the agent of social regeneration in the face of death. He suggests that the role of "the male *borekeen*, the trickster-master of ceremonies at the merry wake ... is that of the social order itself personified" (Ó Crualaoich 1998, p. 193). Ó Crualaoich's analysis affords many valuable insights into the operation of the merry wake as "a central social mechanism for the articulation of resistance—or at least reaction—on the part of the Irish

peasantry to new forms of civil and clerical control in Irish society in early modern and modern times" (p. 173). His structural account of the wake might however be interpreted as underpinning gender binarisms, limiting female agency to the otherworld realm and identifying male authority as representative of the strength and regeneration of the human, social realm. The exploration of the performative elements of wake games with erotic themes suggests that the practices not only accorded a role to female agency in the regeneration of community, but that they played with and destabilised the binary gender oppositions central to the operation of dominant sociopolitical and ecclesiastical discursive systems.

The merry wake featured many different types of games, most involving an element of contest and/or of mockery and laughter. 'Kissing games' involved kissing as a penalty or a reward, and depending on the game, both men and women might choose people they wanted to kiss. Imitative games were very common in the various types of games played. Such games included those involving imitation of the sacraments, amongst them mock marriages, in which the *cleasaidhe* or *borekeen*, dressed as the priest, would pick men and women, marry them, then instruct them in their duties as a married couple, giving instructions which, as is clear from the tone of the accounts, centred on sexual and erotic matters. Church condemnation focused on these games in particular and on some other imitative games, one notable example being 'Building the Ship.'

Descriptions of the game 'Building the Ship' or 'Making the Ship' exist in various accounts, with that of archaeologist Wood-Martin (1902) being among the most detailed. The game follows various stages, wherein a group of men act the part of the ship: the stage 'laying the keel' involves a row of men lying down to form the keel, with the *cleasaidhe* or *borekeen* walking on the keel and beating it to ensure that it is properly put together. The prow and stern are then built, played by a man at either end; the sides of the

ship are made by two rows of men on either side, one row lying, one sitting, the *cleasaidhe* or *borekeen* beating it with a stick to check its soundness. In some accounts, the game includes the stage of painting or tarring the ship, where a bucket of dirty water or soot is thrown over the ship. The mast is then put in place, the mast played by a young man who stands in the centre of the ship. The penultimate stage of the game, 'Erecting the Mast,' is performed by a woman: "gestures, expressions, and acts were used, proving that this part of the play was an undoubted relic of the most primitive times" (Wood-Martin 1902, p. 315). Wood-Martin's account of 'Building the Ship' includes the stage 'Dragging the Ship out of the Mud'; while Prim describes this as a separate game, he informs the reader that "the men engaged actually presented themselves before the rest of the assembly, females as well as males, in a state of nudity, whilst in another game the female performers attired themselves in men's clothes and conducted themselves in a very strange manner" (Prim 1853, p. 334).

The ludic destabilisation and refiguring of binary constructions of gender roles and relationships operate on several levels in 'Building the Ship.' The phallic elements of the game are clear and unambiguous; the Irish term for 'erecting the mast' is '*ag tógáil an chrainn*.' '*Crann*' is the Irish word for both 'tree' and 'mast,' but is also used to refer to the penis. What is most significant is that men play the part of the ship, which is culturally gendered as feminine, while female sexual agency is required for its launch. The flexibility and fluidity of gendered subjectivities and the gendering of agency seen in the games described here are common to many of the wake games, and suggest constructions and understandings of gender and subjectivity radically alterior to the dominant sociopolitical and religious discourses of seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth-century Ireland.

The connection between the merry wake, oral culture and the Rabelaisian carnivalesque has been noted by various scholars, including Ó Crualaoich (1998), Bourke (1988) and Ó Laoire (2005). While it has been suggested that carnivalesque cultural practices have implications for identity and subjectivity formation, the significance of this idea becomes especially clear in exploring the role of performativity and the centrality of the body within the carnivalesque context of the wake. Oral culture is itself performative; in the case of performative elements of popular culture, as with the ritual of the wake, the distinctions between actors and audience are not fixed; what takes place cannot be described simply as imitation or acting. All those present participate in the performance, and what is performed is an aspect of the self. The aspects of the self performed in the wake games are not bound by fixity, but encompass shifts between genders, between the human and the animal, and between persons and objects with cultural and cosmological importance.

Unlike contemporary critical drag performances, wake games may not have had the subversion of dominant norms as their direct aim (although many contained contemporaneous dissident or subversive elements, as in games involving imitation of the sacraments, where the 'borekeen' gave a parodic performance of the priest). Their dissident, subversive relationship to dominant discourses—colonial, Catholic and, from the second half of the nineteenth century, nationalist—may nonetheless be understood in the context of Foucault's analysis of the shifting mechanisms and discourses of power and control with the advent of modernity. Where pre-modern operations of power targeted the body, modernity's concern was with discipline, focusing on the meticulous control of the operations of the body and assuring the constant subjection of the body's forces. Modernity saw the creation of docile bodies, that were self-disciplining and self-regulating in line with the requirements of dominant forces and interests.[14] As a practice

originating in the pre-modern era, the merry wake demonstrates plays with power focused on the body, where power and authority is not absolute or fixed, but is played out and performed. Power itself is recognised and expressed both as performative and as bound up with contests that are often eroticised and/or violent.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, both the process of modernisation in Ireland ushered in by the colonial regime and the rising power and influence of the Catholic Church placed an ever-increasing emphasis on the regulation and discipline of the body. If the colonial regime sought to control the Irish population according to modern operations of discipline and power, the Catholic Church in Ireland, which had a historical, doctrinal suspicion of the body, and particularly of the female body, intensified its attempts to regulate the Catholic body in the post-Famine period as part of its pursuit of power and influence within the colonial state. Bourgeois nationalism, in its turn, was not only co-articulated with Catholicism but also intrinsically bound up with colonial discourse.[15] The embodied practices of the wake, and the understandings and knowledge engendered by those practices had a powerful role in contesting the inevitability, and thus the legitimacy, of dominant hierarchies—cosmological, social and political.

The growing hegemony of the above institutions and discourses, along with other factors, led to the eventual decline of the traditional merry wake, yet its alterior, performative discursive elements did not simply disappear from the culture. The post-Famine period in Ireland witnessed not only the growing power of the Catholic Church as a power bloc within Irish society and the emergence of bourgeois nationalism, but also witnessed a rapid language shift from Irish to English, particularly among élite groups. Given that the language of the Catholic Church and of élite nationalism was primarily English, alterior discursive and cultural elements persisted and continued to exist within Irish-language culture in various forms. Those cultural elements and forms are available

to be drawn on and refigured within both Irish- and English-language popular culture, and can be brought to the fore in their resonances with contemporary cultural practices. The widespread support for Panti and for her calls for recognition and equality in Ireland may be linked in part to such resonances. Elements of the carnivalesque continue to inhabit contemporary Irish culture, not least in its use of macabre and subversive humour, and resonate with aspects of drag performance. Panti herself alludes to the continuities between contemporary drag artists and performers within the carnivalesque mode, describing her role as similar to that of "the court jester, the Fool of old, who can say the unsayable."[16] The performative destabilisations of contemporary drag echo in many senses those of performative oral culture, where subjectivity is understood as mutable and subject to destabilisation, particularly as a vehicle for carnivalesque truth-telling and contesting systems and discourses of dominance / domination. In this regard, it is of no small significance that in her emergence into mainstream consciousness, Panti has been publicly connected with and 'read' in tandem with her alter ego, Rory O'Neill. Seen as part of O'Neill's identity, the ludic destabilisations of binarisms and fixities vis-à-vis gender and sexual identity performed by Panti are a performance of aspects of the self, not by one who is fixedly other, but by one from within the community who is recognised as such. This may go some way towards explaining Panti / O'Neill's status as 'a national treasure,' perceived as 'a bit of a quare one' for whom there is an unambiguous and valued place within the community.

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Notes

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[1] See Lee and Madden's *Irish Studies: Geographies and Genders* (2008), and Magennis and Mullen's *Irish Masculinities: Reflections on Literature and Culture* (2011).

[2] From the AMI website <http://www.alternativemissireland.com/>. This website is no longer live, but archival material relating to the pageant, including promotional material, is held in the Irish Queer Archive located in the National Library of Ireland: <http://www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/151_IQA.pdf>.

[3] Briquettes are compacted bricks of shredded peat used as a solid fuel. The semi-state company *Bord na Móna* was established under de Valera's government in 1946 to commercially harvest peat from Ireland's bogs as part of de Valera's mission to develop Ireland as a self-sufficient economy.

[4] See Nancy Fraser (1995).

[5] See Butler (1997) and Cohen (2005).

[6] The video of "AMI goes Diddly Sci-Fi" is available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bm3a5Vz7xMQ>, accessed 17 October 2015.

[7] <http://heyevent.com/event/awxc76tlozbhea/alternative-miss-ireland-xvii-2011-sunday-13-march-olympia-theatre-dublin>, accessed 12 November 2015.

[8] See <http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/behind-the-scenes/backstage-blogs/the-risen-people-blog/the-noble-call/>, accessed 12 November 2015.

[9] For a general analysis of cultural and sociopolitical factors underlying the Referendum campaign and the result, see Murphy (2016) and Elkink et al. (2016).

[10] For a critical analysis of discourses on marriage equality as bound up with normalisation and assimilationist imperatives, see Neary (2016).

[11] See <http://www.peopleoftheyear.com/Inspirational-People/2014-People-of-the-Year.aspx>, accessed 17 November 2015. For media coverage of the award, see Zhuang (2014).

[12] See Somerville's "Queer" (2007).

[13] See Binchy (1958).

[14] See Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977).

[15] Focused on legitimating its claims to independent nationhood within the terms of empire, nationalism retained, while sometimes inverting, the binarisms of colonial ideology in relation to gender, culture and civility. As David Lloyd points out, "nationalist monologism is a dialogic inversion of imperial ideology, caught willy-nilly in the position of a parody, antagonistic but dependent" (1993, p. 112).

[16] *The Queen of Ireland* (Dir. Conor Horgan, 2015).