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Adjusting men and abiding mummies: gendering the recession in Ireland

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Across a wide rhetorical spectrum the notion of men as particularly and singularly impacted by the global recession has become culturally commonsensical and affectively potent. In Ireland, where a historically unprecedented period of growth has given way to a vertiginous experience of economic contraction, such dynamics have a particular valence as a mode of response to an earlier state of affairs during the boom time of the Celtic Tiger. One predominant interpretation of events post-2007 characterizes the recession as a national moral reckoning where a 'soft' feminine consumer culture is now appropriately in retreat while new rhetorics of manliness have sometimes seemed to be creeping into Irish popular culture in tandem with the shift toward economic uncertainty. Popular texts of the period including radio and television advertisements, journalistic commentary, and other non-fiction forms and viral videos speak to a fundamental imperative to stabilize masculinity and to forward a narrative of restoration that includes the reinstatement of 'correctly' gendered roles and national 'authenticity'. This article tracks the placement of intense economic austerity as a project nullifying the interests of gender equity and argues that the stock gender dyad of recessionary Irish media is that of the adjusting man and the abiding mammy.

Keywords

Irishness, masculinity, femininity, recession, post-feminism

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In a 2011 article in the US magazine *Vanity Fair*, financial journalist Michael Lewis offered an account of the collapse of the Celtic Tiger. The article consistently sustains a gendered subtext and, early on, it conveys the frequently made (if seldom elaborated on or explored) point that cultures of male entitlement and risk had much to do with the global financial collapse. Specifically, notes Lewis, 'Ireland's financial collapse...was created by the sort of men who ignore their wives' suggestion that maybe they should stop and ask for directions' (Lewis 2011). Setting the Irish post-boom period in comparative relation to circumstances in Greece and Iceland, Lewis suggests that, while cultural interrogations of such gendered entitlement have emerged in other nations (based in part on the recognition that rhetoric of business-friendliness are often oblique endorsements of gender and class privilege), Ireland almost uniquely clings to its status quo.

My analysis here of the social and representational culture of economic contraction in Ireland rests on a sense of urgency for critical studies in the humanities to keep pace with the rapid economic and social changes brought on by the recession. While fields including economics, sociology, equality studies, and others have much to contribute in the work of analysing the recession's social character, media studies offers a unique disciplinary pathway for interpreting recession culture given its focus on the analysis of collective symbolic environments that hold enormous sway in shaping public views. Looking to pinpoint the ways that public culture genders our producing and consuming roles, I invoke and extend the historical feminist commitment to redressing social and economic inequities as one of the many critical tasks that arise in relation to the unravelling of Celtic Tiger prosperity. In a general sense, I aim to open up some of the ways in which culture deals with economic inequalities, manages the resentments they generate, and produces a structure of feeling in which rhetorics of choice remain centralized. In the context of the normalization of socially deleterious forms of profit optimization, we need to examine how patterns of intense wealth concentration (patterns that still remain largely uninterrogated in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland) interact with and impact cultural conceptualizations of both femininity and masculinity. The specifically gendered aspects of the evolving financial situation – how the crisis has differently affected men and women, as well as workers from different classes – is too seldom brought into view. In recession-beset Ireland, as I will show, various popular culture forms figure adjustment to the recession in terms of male mobility/activity and female stasis/passivity.

A key development with which I am concerned is the placement of intense economic austerity as an overriding imperative that nullifies the interests of gender equity. (There is a frequent implication that equality and diversity issues are to be reserved for times of affluence, rather than adversity.) Post-feminist popular culture has tended to suggest that gender equality has been achieved, rallying around images of success and 'empowerment' in such forms

as the cinematic action heroine, the female lawyer of television drama, and the spectacularly sexually assertive pop star. Recessionary culture maintains these celebratory discourses, of course, but, I argue, they are underwritten or, more precisely, contextualized by a perception that equality is a luxury that we can no longer afford under straitened circumstances. Within this formulation, the post-feminist female consumer is placed as an icon of excess as much as admiration, an emblem of the boom and a symptom of its short-term financialism. (In Ireland this figure has taken the form of the 'D4 girl' or the 'Drummy Mummy'.)

In this article I consider how certain media forms, and popular culture more generally, are responding to the uncertain citizenship (of individuals) in post-boom culture. The vaporization of public resources, the rupturing of the social contract, and the disappearance of forms of health and safety protection long understood to be intrinsic to the working lives of citizens in Western democracies have lately accompanied the emergence of extraordinary new protocols of preference for corporations.¹ In the United States such preference has been most strikingly enacted via the paradigm of 'corporate personhood'. Karen Ho has noted that 'what is clearly unique in the recent history of capitalism...is the complete divorce of what is perceived as the best interests of the corporation from the interests of most employees' (Ho 2009:3). Timed for a moment in which recovery rhetoric threatens to quell emergent economic and social analyses spurred by the global financial system's unravelling, my analysis proceeds on the basis that 'recovery must be understood as a project on the part of financial and political elites to re-establish and fortify an economic and social order that was on the brink of collapse and discredit' (Hayward 2011). Its analyses of popular culture conceptualizations of gender contemplate a period of ambiguous continuity with, and in some cases, conspicuous rupture of post-feminist representational norms.

Across a wide rhetorical spectrum the notion of men as particularly and singularly impacted by the global recession has become culturally commonsensical and affectively potent. Yet, as Heather Tirado Gilligan has astutely pointed out, this is hardly a new phenomenon. She writes that 'end-of-men crises have cropped up repeatedly since the late nineteenth century, until they have assumed almost mythic stature. They are most acute whenever there is an economic slowdown, often resulting in a backlash against women in the workforce, instead of a focus on the factors that lead to such downturns in the economy' (Tirado Gilligan 2011). Similarly, Hamilton Carroll has noted that 'white male injury, phantasmagoric though it may be, is a phenomenon that attempts to recoup political, economic and cultural authority

¹ Advocates of 'corporate personhood' hold that corporations possess the same rights entitlements as individuals. A Supreme Court decision in January 2010 ruled that corporations hold free speech rights that should enable them to make political donations without restraint, thus effectively ensuring a high degree of corporate influence in US political elections.

in the face of a destabilized national consensus' (Hamilton 2011:2). Such assessments are crucial to bear in mind when considering how recession has given a new charge to pre-existing discourses of white male disenfranchisement.

In Ireland, where a historically unprecedented period of growth has given way to a vertiginous experience of economic contraction, such dynamics have a particular valence as a mode of response to an earlier state of affairs during the boom time of the Celtic Tiger. In this period, as Gerry Smyth aptly notes, 'the Irish political community had sold the country to a free market ideology whose overarching characteristic was its contempt for the sovereign government' (Smyth 2012:133). Moreover, as Sinéad Molony has argued, during the Irish boom, the media constantly celebrated 'an elite class of businessmen, bankers, property developers and politicians who were presented as the canny, 'ballsy' progenitors of an impossible economic boom' (Molony 2014:184). Further, as she notes, 'despite the marked increase of women in employment during the Celtic Tiger, the performance of the Irish female as a domesticated consumer was ideologically privileged over productivity in the workplace' (Molony 2014:188–189).

In the rapid transformation of Ireland from a seeming capitalist utopia to something altogether different, cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity play a key role and it bears noticing how central discourses of gender are to the current Irish economic crisis on many levels. One predominant interpretation of events characterizes the recession as a national moral reckoning where a 'soft' feminine consumer culture is now appropriately in retreat. New rhetorics of manliness have sometimes seemed to be creeping into Irish popular culture in tandem with the shift toward economic uncertainty.

Exemplary in this regard is a radio ad from the Snickers 'Get Some Nuts' campaign starring 1980s popular culture icon Mr T. This ad suggests that the appropriate response to the exigencies of the recession is remasculinization, with Mr T serving as a model. In the radio version, for instance, he enjoins listeners: 'You tired? You stuck in traffic? Get some nuts!' The characteristically furious Mr T (who, in the years since his television hit *The A-Team*, has made a living as a motivational speaker) presupposes and seeks to reroute male anger – implicit in the ad is the suggestion that instead of directing it at structural causes of the recession, the 'so-called men of Ireland' (as he puts it) should use it to toughen themselves. In radio ads customized for the Irish market, Irish men are reproached for having become overcivilized ('lately Irish men be getting all "ooh", and "uh huh, uh huh"') and are exhorted to reclaim an essentialized fierceness that T recalls from his youth when he perceived Irish men 'had crazy eyes and fiery hair'.

Ads such as these play to a culture in which worry about the experience of joblessness is distinctively gendered. While we are encouraged to reflect on job

loss as a blow to male identity and pride, we customarily lack a representational vocabulary for women losing work; when they do, we don't imagine it being as consequential for them as it is for men. As I have noted, this complies with a broader transnational dynamic in which the white man is consistently placed as the sign, symptom, and victim of recession. Indeed as the Snickers radio spot suggests, anxieties about the viability and potency of Irish masculinity have flourished in a variety of recessionary representational contexts. These discourses often circulate in their crudest form in tabloid print media; Irish newspapers have run stories like 'Slump in Sex for Recession-hit Men', which appeared in the *Dublin Metro Herald*, a widely read free daily newspaper, on 19 November 2010, the Friday of a week in which it became apparent that, despite the vigorous denials of government, an International Monetary Fund bailout of the Irish economy was not just imminent, but well underway. The piece is worth quoting in full:

The recession is diminishing the contents of men's trousers in more ways than one, a new sex survey suggests. It found women are as demanding as ever and do not care about how stressed their men are. *The Erotic Review* quizzed more than 500 people and discovered men were dreaming of taking on less problematic partners. "We are seeing a real epidemic of anxiety-related issues, which will be causing many a bedroom bust up," the review claimed (*Dublin Metro Herald*, 19 November 2010).

In various ways a 'soft' news item of this kind maintains discursive and ideological continuity with other cultural texts stressing the need to 'man up' to contend with the difficulties of the recession. While a news item derived from a British website can only be minimally indicative in an Irish context, the decision by the newspaper to run it is more telling of expectations and ideas about the recession as a sexual setback for Irish men. Admittedly, distinctions between importation and indigeneity can be hard to draw, but I think it is noteworthy that Irish blog *Politics.ie*'s 'Culture and Commentary Forum' featured a lengthy set of exchanges in relation to the topic 'demasculinization of the Irish male'. This thread of commentary was launched when a poster asked: 'Has anyone noticed how demasculinized the Irish man has become? They [*sic*] are all awash with soaps and gels and Christ they listen to Lady Gaga and drink West Coast Cooler and this is just the straight lads! RIP the Irish male 2000 onwards.' In pinpointing the onset of 'demasculinization' in relation to the height of the Celtic Tiger, the poster feeds the argument that recession provides an opportunity to recover masculinity. While the ensuing conversational thread devolved largely into debates about men's use of grooming products, whether men in rural areas might be less subject to demasculinization, and the disappearance of truly 'manly' film stars as role models, there was favourable response to another poster's observation that 'I think it's to do with the general collapse of any heroic quality within our society'. Such commentary chimed with other sources of rhetoric regarding lost national masculinity such as an *Irish Times* editorial lamenting the IMF bailout by asking 'did the men of 1916 [of the Easter Rising] die for this?' (*Irish Times* 2010) Another variant of this mode of thought has been more recently

exhibited in the choice by the *Irish Times* to run 'Men Overboard' in October 2013, a multipart series documenting the recession's impact on Irish men².

If the need for action to counter the economic crisis has consistently been framed, in both journalistic and political rhetoric, in terms of a language of toughness and austerity premised on supposed masculine virtues, then a piece entitled 'Working Women almost Certainly Caused the Credit Crunch', which ran in the *Irish Times* on 2 February 2009, is illustrative of the limits of such discourse. In the piece Newton Emerson attempted a satire, suggesting that the recession could be alleviated if women left their jobs. 'Women', wrote Emerson, 'were the driving force behind the greed, consumerism and materialism of the Celtic Tiger years and it was female employment that funded their oestrogen-crazed acquisitiveness' (Emerson 2009). The piece caused a furore when many online readers did not pick up on its satirical tone and responded seriously and in agreement with the suggestions laid out by Emerson. An incident of this kind begins to get at the ways that men's falling status and positionality in the recession is recuperated by their symbolic mastery of women. This is part of a broader pattern in which recession-beset masculinity is stabilized through invocation of its social 'inferiors'.

A more moderate recessionary text, but one that I think speaks to the same fundamental imperative to stabilize masculinity and to forward a narrative of restoration that includes the reinstatement of 'correctly' gendered roles and national 'authenticity', is the 'Man in the City' series of television ads produced for Halifax Bank and featuring the well-known Irish actor Colm Meaney. As Meaney roams Dublin city centre in the ads, he expresses a longing for the security/stability of enduring national institutions and character. Meaney's Irish 'everyman' persona, sourced in his roles in film adaptations of several of Roddy Doyle's Dublin's Northside novels, makes him the ideal figure to appear here in a disingenuous presentation which opens with a distinction between media-produced 'fiction' and more quotidian realms. As the ad begins, we see Meaney walking off a film set saying 'back to reality', then, addressing the spectator in a short burst of recession-conscious dialogue: 'These days we all like to feel like there's a bit of security around us. Familiar faces, places.' While he extols the services of Halifax Bank he moves through Dublin city centre, patting the nose of a horse on St Stephen's Green while the clang of the LUAS tram can be heard in the background. Culminating with a joke based on a particular stereotype of Irish masculinity, the ad's close is a half-embarrassed Meaney taking a phone call from his mother and telling her he's too busy to talk. In this way, the conclusion resembles a set of print ads for WKD alcopops which circulated widely on the sides of Dublin buses in autumn 2011, and highlighted, in an even more direct and contrived fashion, the fearful potential of the Irish mother to exert influence or control over the male

² The first part of the series was published on 6 October 2013 and authored by Kate Holmquist under the 'Men Overboard' title. *Irish Times* Weekend Review, 1–2: 34.

subject. In a highly anxious mode of address, the ad exhorts young men to ‘give your mam a bell...to tell her to ring when your tea’s ready’, converting filial obligation to female domestic subjugation.

At the time of the banking ad’s production, Halifax, a division of the Royal Bank of Scotland, was actively seeking to reposition itself in the Irish market through such promotions as Saturday opening hours and the provision of credit rather than debit cards. At a moment when there was high public knowledge of the corruption and ineptitude of the Irish banking sector (it would shortly be announced that Anglo–Irish Bank had posted the worst losses of any bank in the world) (Oliver 2010), Halifax could be characterized, according to Account Executive Garrett Kinsella, who worked on the ad, as a rather ‘pure’ player in the Irish banking industry (Kinsella 2010). To match its claims of ‘purity’ in a corrupt sector, the ad deploys Meaney as a guarantor of an Irish masculinity that has become globally successful, yet in no way out of touch with its cultural roots. Despite its vigorous efforts to secure Irish customers, Halifax announced the cessation of its operations in Dublin in February 2010, news that was significant enough to be addressed by Taoiseach Brian Cowen in the Dáil that day (Burke-Kennedy and Duncan 2010).

There is a striking thematic of motion in the Meaney ad, and I would suggest that, in fact, male mobility is one of the key emergent tropes of recessionary Irish media working to underpin a fantasy of compensatory agency in straitened circumstances. Such a trope organizes the McDonald’s Euro saver menu ad running for several years in the Irish media market, which depicts a foursome of young Irish men, who in a futuristic Dublin of 2222, beam themselves to McDonald’s via a *Star Trek*-like teleportation mechanism. It is even more strikingly displayed in an ad that ran to near saturation point in autumn 2010 to promote the unfortunately timed opening of Dublin Airport’s capacious new Terminal 2.³ In it, Irish actor David Murray extols the global contributions of the Irish, as he walks in a highly self-assured fashion through the new terminal reminding us that though Ireland is a small island in a big ocean, ‘we’ve reached the world from here’. Murray makes his case by citing Irish contributions to science, politics, and literature, notably invoking a string of male authors and literary characters: ‘Yeats and Friel, Godot and Gulliver, Dracula, and Dorian Gray’. Murray’s confident walk through the terminal, while sustaining a continuous direct address to camera, is accompanied by the relegation of women to the background. The ad’s preferred female image is of uniformed flight attendants who we see numerous

³ The launch took place on 19 November 2010, the day after representatives of the IMF arrived in Dublin to work on what by the end of the month was announced as a €85 billion bailout package at a 5.8 per cent rate of interest. When questioned about whether it had been an appropriate decision to launch the terminal with swag bags for VIP attendees (the bags contained chocolate, Prosecco, and a souvenir replica of the terminal). Minister for Transport Noel Dempsey (as he put it) ‘Refused to apologize’. See Fiach Kelly, ‘No Price – or Apology – given for Terminal 2 Luxury Gift Bags’, *Irish Independent*, 20 November 2010).

times, singly or in pairs, trailing behind him. With one or two briefly glimpsed exceptions, the ad seems to manifest an inability to conceptualize women as business travellers and, in fact, closes with images of attractive women (one in a strapless short dress, another, sampling perfumes) as signifiers of the duty free shopping options available at the airport.

Figure 1.
A 2010 ad publicizing the debut of Terminal 2 at Dublin Airport communicates business confidence in a gendered fashion

(Source: DAA Terminal 2 advertisement, YouTube video, 1:00, posted by Dublin Airport, 9 November 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdjLBXlieIo>)

This ad gave rise to a widely seen parody version. Produced for the RTÉ current affairs programme, *Eleventh Hour*, it shows a dishevelled man making the same walk through the airport terminal citing figures about the national debt, puncturing the mood of business confidence the official ad seeks to promote, and raising to the surface the unspoken and decisive element its predecessor narrowly holds at bay: that the airport now functions as a launch point for emigrant departures as much as a hub for business opportunity. Significantly outstripping its predecessor's number of downloads on YouTube, this parody piece was matched in digital popularity by 'Horse Outside', a viral video produced by Limerick comedy hip-hop duo Rubberbandits, and a sensation in Ireland that made a serious bid for the position of number one Christmas single in 2010. 'Horse Outside' celebrates a crudely adaptive recessionary masculinity as a working-class man at a wedding exhorts a bridesmaid to go home with him, distinguishing himself from his car-owning rivals by the display of a horse, which the couple ride off on together at the

close of the piece.⁴ Here, an ironic reconnection with a rural national past furthers the display of a masculine performative mode that proves itself through the dominance of women. It will be clear, I think, that the mobility trope I've been tracking also extends to 'Horse Outside' and we should bear in mind how a masculinized fear of being rendered immobile/passive is also at work in the Mr T ad in which he alludes to being stuck in traffic. The vast popularity and cultural unruliness of these depictions is importantly accompanied by male characterizations that prove themselves through their dominance/acquisition of women; the Dublin Airport ad, as noted, showcases a confident and continuous male direct address to camera, accompanied by the relegation of women to background figures consisting of flight attendants and duty-free shoppers. Parodic inversions such as these speak to some of the ways that digital culture can facilitate a destabilization of the ground for commercial and governmental interests, while leaving patriarchal interests untouched.

As its parody form indicates, this ad is working to stave off public knowledge about the return of mass emigration. Yet, I want to suggest that in other recent Irish media forms, we can track the conceptualization of emigration as a form of compensatory agency and one consistently associated with male subjectivity. In the 10 January 2011 broadcast of the RTÉ documentary, *Departure Day*, virtually all of the profile subjects were male; the only female profile subjects were mothers and wives of emigrating Irish men. At the start of the second part of the broadcast, a man who runs seminars on emigration asserts that 'it's generally the men who are looking to go.' (Despite this, shots of the audience reveal a number of women in attendance at one of his seminars). Shortly after this, voice-over narration tells us 'young men, more than any other group, face the prospect of emigration.' Finally, one young woman is profiled but she doesn't speak, and then a University College Cork professor discusses his daughter, who has emigrated (she is shown via Skype but her father's voice drowns hers out for the majority of the segment). Here and elsewhere the seeming inability to visualize female emigration may be explained as a function of the corollary to the trope of male mobility – a counterpoint female stasis.

While ads and documentary features such as these have been running on Irish television and radio, an emergent strain of popular cinema has repositioned femininity as rural, relational, and abiding. *His and Hers* (2010), a word-of-mouth phenomenon that became the highest grossing documentary in Ireland since Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), consists wholly of interviews with girls and women in the Irish midlands about the men in their lives. The film works strongly in a reminiscence register, as a significant percentage of the interview subjects are widows whose comments continually

⁴ One of the most striking elements of 'Horse Outside' invokes a long representational tradition of horses as symbols of an indomitable Irish spirit, sourced in both Irish mythology and more recent iterations such as *Into the West* and clinched here through a reference to *Tír na nÓg*.

emphasize their desolation without a partner. The trailer for the film opens with what it identifies as an ‘old Irish proverb’, ‘a man loves his girlfriend the most, his wife the best, but his mother the longest’, while the first spoken words we hear attest to the idea that ‘nobody loves like an Irishman’. Celebrated for its warm depiction of relational, domestic femininities, the film articulates a sense of mourning for absent patriarchs and generates an account of femininity ‘in which there is no room for historical change, no space for diversity, difference or disruption’ (Molony 2014:278). Another of the most high-profile Irish films of the early recession was Neil Jordan’s *Ondine* (2010), which mystifies and exoticizes femininity in the form of its beautiful protagonist, who may or may not be a ‘selkie’, a mythological seal-woman who is caught up in the nets of a Cork fisherman (Colin Farrell).⁵ This tendency to mythologize femininity and render it amorphous runs not just through recent popular cinema, but arises as well in contemporary political rhetoric, as I shall presently show.

Debbie Ging has aptly observed that ‘the Celtic Tiger years have led us into new discursive arenas, in which ideological consensus is increasingly achieved at the level of the symbolic, the rhetorical and the discursive’, noting further that ‘ideological production is sometimes most usefully conceptualised in terms of “banal” representational practices’ (Ging 2009:52–70). In the rapid repositioning of Ireland from an exemplary case to a cautionary one, we run the risk of a rollback of opportunities for women under the rhetorical cover of necessity, and popular cultural representations may operate in support of such reversions. While it may be unsurprising, given the conservative commercial interests of the tabloid press, chocolate manufacturing companies, and banks, that they would deploy depictions of this kind, it is equally noteworthy that works of progressive political commentary and artistic endeavour also employ gendered vocabularies with conservative connotations.

For instance, the frequency with which recent artistic representations and bestselling non-fiction have positioned women as stalwart recession survivors or as inspirational figures for the reconstitution of the Republic is striking. With their deep sourcing in centuries-old archetypes of the Irish nation as ‘Erin’, or ‘Hibernia’, these representations belie the progressive political contexts in which they emerge. Some well-intentioned critics on the Left have called for modes of reinvention that look like resuscitation, at least with respect to paradigms of gender. For example, in a panel discussion held in Dublin’s Liberty Hall on 4 November 2010, every one of the evening’s five speakers expressed their endorsement for European quotas on gender representation to be put into effect in the Irish Dáil. Such tokenistic initiatives are indicative of the way that, in Ireland, progressive political hopes for civic rejuvenation and economic recovery are often feminized.

⁵ The film’s mystical romance was authenticated by popular knowledge that its stars were a real-life couple.

In keeping with this tendency to place women in contexts of past and future, artist Brian McCarthy's recent work uses nearly exclusively female images in its renderings of an Ireland decimated by global capitalism. In his striking *Boomtown* series, McCarthy paints scenes of economic and social ruination set in a dystopian Dublin of the near future. In one of these paintings a post-Celtic Tiger capital city is envisioned as a massive shantytown with the only focalized figure of a woman wading through the River Liffey with a basket of laundry, in a repurposing of an iconic image of Third World poverty. In this rendering, the future essentially meets the past, and both are fully feminized.

I have been suggesting that Irish popular culture's treatment of phenomena like economic decline and renewed emigration is heavily gendered. The great ambivalence also apparent in such depictions is further displayed in the last media text I want to discuss here, an ad for Kerrygold butter, which has been regularly broadcast as part of Kerrygold's 'Made in Ireland' campaign. The ad centralizes a figure who lingers at the margins of some of the other popular texts I have discussed (notably the ads for Halifax bank and WKD alcopops), while being centralized in *His and Hers*. It also brings full circle my argument that the stock gender dyad of recessionary Irish media is that of the adjusting man and the abiding mammy.

The Kerrygold ad opens with an Irish man scooping up soil on the family farm, which he presses to his lips and then places in a box before joining his mother and German wife for a breakfast in which butter is prominently displayed and passed. The wife tells her mother-in-law, 'Angela, we'll miss your cooking in Berlin, but at least we'll have Kerrygold there too.' It is clear in the bitter rejoinder 'ah sure, they export all our best stuff', that the remark characterizes not just dairy products but human capital. A tearful goodbye takes place between mother and son and the meaning of the scooped up soil becomes apparent as the man and his wife sit on a train, and he opens the box to a voice-over which alludes to the expectation of a child: 'He'll be born in Germany but his feet will touch Irish soil first.'

Figure 2.
An ad for Kerrygold butter showcases the export of both food products and human capital amidst the altered economic and social relations of the post-CelticTiger period.

(Source: 'Kerrygold Made of Ireland', YouTube Video, 0:40, posted by 'lecaic', 2 January 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyUC7Wg53nQ>)

Food exports are often considered a bright spot in the post-Celtic Tiger economy, and hyped as a sector in which the nation should invest to ensure continued robust output.⁶ This ad emerges to ambivalently celebrate the movement of Irish food products in the global economy while lamenting the necessity of human circulation and its costs to the nation. Tapping cultural grief about emigration while centralizing the abiding Irish mammy, and a weird fetishization of homeland soil, the ad unwittingly betrays an awareness that the global circulation of Irish brands cannot compensate for lack of economic opportunity at home or for emigration due to economic duress. This accounts for its rather complex shadings and authorization of (an isolated but significant moment of) female anger. This mammy is abiding but angry, an anger that is obliquely spoken when she

⁶ See 'Food Industry "to Create 30,000 Jobs"', *Irish Times*, 30 July 2012, and Conor Humphries, 'After the Bust, Irish Look Back to the Land', *Reuters*, 24 December 2011. The latter notes the support for agri-business by the Irish government in part as 'the key to extracting some value from the vast land holdings left in state hands after Dublin was forced to take over banks' risky development loans.' On 9 October 2012 it was announced, with much fanfare, that the Kerry Group, now the third largest company on the Irish stock exchange, would create a global technology and innovation centre in County Kildare with a large number of associated planned hires. See Fiach Kelly, Colm Kelpie, and Thomas Molloy, 'Food Giant Creates 1,300 Jobs with €100m Expansion', *The Independent*, 9 October 2012.

asserts that ‘they export all our best stuff.’⁷ Moreover, the strange act of the son scooping up soil on the family farm before he emigrates (his attention is briefly drawn to a neighbour who calls a bird that alights on his wrist, suggesting that those who depart will always make their way back) activates vampiric associations. This moment is key to an understanding that, at another level, the Kerrygold ad is about the new ‘undead’, middle-class citizens who experience an unwanted mobility and yearn for home.

The glimmers of a complex biopolitics that register in this ad have factored more widely in recent years in transnational popular culture’s romance with zombies and vampires. There is a distinct overlap of nomenclature between this representational category and forms of economic discourse that highlight ‘zombie banks’ with the notorious Goldman Sachs having been aptly dubbed a ‘giant vampire squid’.⁸ Indeed, some of this sort of rhetoric has been nationally particularized in Ireland where we are now seen to dwell in a supernaturalized post-Celtic Tiger landscape of ‘zombie hotels’ and ‘ghost estates’. While the current phase of capitalism increasingly gives off signs that it has no need of a middle-class, popular culture texts, such as the Kerrygold ‘Made of Ireland’ ad, betray a dawning appreciation of that class’s potential for social and economic dislocation and death.

Conclusion

Debbie Ging notes that in Ireland ‘Gender has become an increasingly popular prism through which to view a broad range of contemporary social ills’ (Ging 2009:53). In Ireland’s rapid conversion from capitalist utopia to dystopia, a gendered logic of ascription/explanation for developments whose speed and scale nearly everyone finds overwhelming and disorienting, promises (sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly) stabilization through the restitution of essentialized gender dichotomies. These dichotomies rest on certain tropes: the beset recession-impacted man whose anxieties are done away with via his transformation into the remasculinized man, or the man who masters the city and speaks to the financial interests of the banking sector. In some tabloid discourses the enervated, economically disempowered man is even resituated as a man victimized by the demands of his female partner for sex. The mobile male of recessionary Irish popular culture may well represent an adaptation of the glorified male risktaker of the boom years. The scenarios into which he is placed are frequently hollow, clichéd, unconvincing, and easily subject to parody. The mobility gestures made in these texts reflect a stunted, symbolic

⁷ A posting attached to the ad in its YouTube comment thread by ‘antistar 1000’ remarks: ‘The mother detests her German daughter-in-law. Check out her hateful stare.’ Numerous other posters write as Irish emigrants living abroad, some expressing nostalgia for home brought on by the ad.

⁸ See Matt Taibbi, ‘The Great American Bubble Machine’, *Rolling Stone*, 5 April 2010.

mobility in contrast to the idealized, cosmopolitan mobilities of the Celtic Tiger years.

Across a political spectrum, meanwhile, various recessionary representational endeavours situate femininity as marking the past or the future, less commonly the present. Films, popular art, and progressive political rhetoric centralize the passive woman of low agency, who adapts to the circumstances around her, or passively incarnates the lost ideals of the Republic. This consistent thread emphasizes the power of a mythologized femininity to abide and inspire. The abiding Irish mammy has, in this way, been renewed for the post-Celtic Tiger era. Indeed, the most conspicuous sign of her recirculation is Colm O'Regan's 2012 bestselling book *Isn't It Well for Ye?: The Book of Irish Mammies*, a self-described 'celebration of the phenomenon of the Irish mammy' (O'Regan 2012).⁹

Film, television, print, and digital culture increasingly compensate for broad vulnerabilities of economic citizenship with gendered rhetorics of power, success, and family and community membership. In my analysis of the modes of address employed by a cluster of popular texts in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, I have focused on the national specificities at play in these dynamics. Insisting upon 'a destabilization of the category of the "economic" as clearly distinguishable from other social phenomena' (Hayward 2010:288), I have sought to show that long-established tropes of masculinity 'in crisis' (of which feminist scholars have rightly been sceptical) are being renewed for the current moment. The popular culture representations I have discussed here are, I believe, probative of our capacity to map and understand the social phenomena associated with the recession. Scrutiny of these kinds of quotidian media texts facilitates insight into the social fabric of recessionary experience; doing so in a spirit of awareness of their gendered politics is especially important for an Irish studies critical practice, which has too often occluded such considerations.

Addendum¹⁰

As an addendum to this article focusing on the popular culture of crisis in the years of acute recession, it may be worth investigating whether/how such tropes still factor in a 'recovery' phase whose discursive existence currently outstrips its material one. Certainly the 'coping male' has not disappeared from the scene; arguably his beset position has been more definitively sketched since the early years of the recession in 'bromances' like *The Stag* (2013) in which a group of male friends rediscover an essential Irish masculinity in a film plot much indebted to the US *Hangover* franchise. Notably at the film's conclusion Peter McDonald's 'The Machine' celebrates a re-secured culture of male affiliation by

⁹ The book began its life as a set of tweets on Twitter under the handle @Irishmammies.

¹⁰ A prior version of this article was previously published in Tony Tracy and Conn Holohan. 2014 (eds). *Tiger Tales: Irish Masculinity and Culture 1990-2010*. London: Palgrave.

singing U2's 'One' and dedicating the song to his stag-party friends saying 'I love those *hombres*'. Taking up the microphone, he gives a speech that at once acknowledges and depoliticizes the duress of recent times and sets the stage for recovery, characterizing 'One' as 'also a story about Ireland. And the *men*, and the women of Ireland. In recent times we've taken a hell of a beating. What with the economy, and Europe tearing us a new one and the church being total assholes about everything. But we've gotta forgive ourselves, forgive each other, and learn to love ourselves again because the thing is, we're Ireland. And that, my friends, is deadly.' Operating in a far more sombre register, but addressing similar concerns is *Calvary* (2014), which depicts a landscape of post-Celtic Tiger moral ruination in which a virtuous priest seeks to symbolically heal and unify a devastated community but the weight of economic and moral criminality proves too great.

Equally the regenerated Irish mammy has retaken cultural ground as the subject of the BBC television series *Mrs Brown's Boys*. The runaway success of the series and the celebrity of its star Brendan O'Carroll (cross-dressing as Agnes Brown), have been prominent features of Irish popular culture in recent years. Writing in *The Irish Times*, Bernice Harrison reports on a researcher from a BBC radio programme contacting her to talk about the series and telling her that many UK viewers 'thought Brendan O'Carroll's creation was in fact a woman, an actual Irish mammy.'¹¹ The putative sociological centrality of the archetype has anchored articles in the press, such as 'What It Takes to be an Irish Mammy's Perfect Son', offering behavioural tips for keeping Irish mothers happy.¹²

Also notable is Sky television's mother and son adventure programme, *50 Ways to Kill Your Mammy* in which former RTÉ presenter Baz Ashmawy and his 71-year-old mother Nancy undertake daredevil feats together. Debuting in August 2014, *50 Ways to Kill Your Mammy* implicitly serves as a narrative of Ashmawy's post-crash professional rehabilitation, a high-profile hit for a onetime TV personality who was downgraded to radio and ultimately axed altogether during RTÉ budget cuts in 2012. Nancy's role serves, in part, to re-orient her son's persona toward family values and more modest financial practices. As Tanya Sweeney noted in a review of the series, 'it's easy to see just why Nancy has piqued the interest of Sky TV executives. She's an unflappable firebrand, yet, true to Irish mammy type, she will blanch when her son buys an expensive designer shirt.'¹³

There are some signs of creative work defamiliarizing and delegitimizing the representational authority of the tropes of the coping public man and the abiding domestic woman. Illustrative in this regard is *Run & Jump* (2013), which might be said to deconstruct the Irish mammy, relying on her until the point when she simply cannot go on in a narrative about a Kerry woman seeking to

¹¹ 'Television: An Irish Mammy Blasts Stereotypes,' *The Irish Times*, 29 August 2014.

¹² Darragh McManus, 'What It Takes to Be an Irish Mammy's Perfect Son,' *Irish Independent*, 21 July 2014.

¹³ 'Why is Baz Ashmawy Trying to Kill His Mammy?', *The Irish Times*, 15 August 2014.

hold her family together after her husband has suffered a stroke. In most respects the cultural preoccupation with men in crisis continues unabated; coverage of emigrants in *The Irish Times*' 'Emigration Generation', for instance, remains skewed in gender terms. As Ireland settles into a highly suppositional 'recovery' phase, some of the gendered hallmarks of crisis I sought to identify are less strikingly in evidence but the coping man and the 'mammy' are proving sturdy features in cultural narratives of crisis capitalism.

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Résumé

A travers un large spectre rhétorique, la notion d'homme, particulièrement impactée par la crise mondiale, est devenue largement acceptée. En Irlande, où une période de croissance sans précédent a entraîné une dramatique expérience d'austérité économique, de telles dynamiques ont une valeur particulière en tant

que réponse à des situations propre à certaines périodes, comme l'âge d'or du Tigre Celta. Une interprétation prédominante des événements survenus après 2007 caractérise la récession comme un règlement de compte national et moral où une culture féministe modérée est en recul au profit de nouvelles rhétoriques sexistes qui semblent parfois être dominantes dans la culture populaire irlandaise dans un contexte d'incertitude économique. Des textes populaires de la période ainsi que la radio et la télévision, la publicité, les commentaires journalistiques, et d'autres œuvres non-fictives comme des vidéos virales parlent d'un impératif fondamental de stabiliser la masculinité et d'encourager une restauration incluant un renouveau de 'genres bien orientés' et 'd'authenticité nationale'. Cet article suit la mise en place de l'austérité économique comme projet annulant les intérêts de l'égalité des genres et affirme que la dichotomie de genres des média conservateurs irlandais prône une domination masculine et une soumission des femmes.

Resumen

A través de un largo espectro retórico, la noción de varón, que sufre el impacto particular y singular de la recesión global, se ha convertido en un potente y efectivo sentido común. En Irlanda, donde se pasó de un histórico y sin precedente periodo de crecimiento económico a una vertiginosa experiencia de contracción económica, estas dinámicas tienen validez particular como un modo de respuesta a ciertos periodos, como la era del 'boom' económico del 'tigre Celta'. Una interpretación prevalente de los eventos posteriores a 2007, caracteriza la recesión como un cálculo a la moral nacional, donde una 'suave' cultura de consumo femenino está ahora de salida, mientras una nueva retórica de virilidad pareciera estar apropiándose de la cultura popular en Irlanda en concierto con el cambio hacia una incertidumbre económica. Textos populares de la época incluyen publicidad en radio y Televisión, comentarios de periodistas y otras formas de videos no-ficcionales muy populares hablan del imperativo fundamental de estabilizar la masculinidad y avanzar hacia una narrativa de restauración que incluye el restablecimiento de los roles "correctos" de género y un 'autentico' nacionalismo. Este artículo revisa la puesta en marcha de una intensa austeridad económica como un proyecto de anulación de los intereses de equidad de género a la vez que argumenta que los medios de comunicación conservadores Irlandeses refuerzan la dicotomía de género en la figura de un hombre adaptativo y una madre perdurable.