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# Irish Motherhood in Irish Nonfiction: Abortion and Agency

*Mothers were the best. Mothers worked and worried and sacrificed and had the smallest amount on their plates when the family sat down to eat, mothers wore aprons and slaved, and mothers went to the confraternity on a Sunday evening and whispered things to each other in the chapel grounds about their wombs and woes.*
-- *Edna O'Brien,* Mother Ireland

A woman's place is in the home, caring for her children, according to Irish law. Article 41.1.2 of the Irish constitution states "that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved." Furthermore, the state "shall endeavor to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home." In a few sentences, all women in the newly founded Republic of Ireland were defined as mothers and confined to the domestic. In multiple reports of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the group has recommended constitutional reform of Article 41.1.2, along with general language changes, to rectify the persistent stereotyping experienced by the women of Ireland, but as of June 2020 it remains untouched. In Edna O'Brien's *Mother Ireland*, her lyrical memoir and portrait of rural Ireland during her childhood in the 1940s and 1950s, published in 1976, reaches for the deep cultural associations with women as Ireland, with women as the State: "Countries are either mothers or fathers, and engender the emotional bristle secretly reserved for either sire. Ireland has always been a mother, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and of course the gaunt Hag of Beare."

Hearing this for the first time in a lecture hall at Trinity College Dublin, I scoffed with my fellow students at the backwards absurdity of the language, but I also assumed it was a humorous relic of a past.

Although I knew abortion was illegal in Ireland, my knowledge didn't stretch to connecting the constitutional ban on abortion, enshrined in the eighth amendment added by popular vote in 1983, the constitutional definition of women as homemakers and the systematic erasure of the reality of mothering from Irish history and contemporary public systems and policies. Perhaps more importantly, not once during that study of history and politics, and a later graduate course in social politics, and career in government and social inclusion policy, did I ever learn about Irish motherhood as a political institution.

My reckoning with Irish motherhood as an institution coincided with the escalation of the Abortion Rights Campaign (2017-2018) because I had begun to write essays about my own mothering experiences in Ireland. The campaign was successful in repealing the 8th amendment, but it also irreversibly changed Irish society's understanding and representation of the experience of women around pregnancy, motherhood and autonomy to choose neither. Irish scholars and activists argue in both volumes of *The Abortion Papers Ireland* that the abortion issue is an embedded debate about the societal construction of motherhood, family, gender norms and ultimately, the control of humanity's reproduction. These constructions had a further complex connection to an Irish identity created by the Catholic Church and Ireland's political relationship with Britain. Prior to 2018's referendum, abortion remained criminalized and punishable based on the British legal framework, the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act. The "right to travel" outside Ireland for an abortion and the right to obtain or provide information about abortion (outside the state) services was added to Irish law following high-profile court cases taken by women against the State in the 1990s.

The success of the campaign to repeal the 8th amendment suggests its power lay partly in the writing and storytelling about a motherhood that includes diverse experiences of pregnancy, consent, choice and loss. Bypassing paths to traditional publishing, in which women authors still are underrepresented, and nonfiction writing on abortion confined to academic publications, writers published their essays, poetry and spoken word on social media platforms and in self-published anthologies, like *In*

*Her Shoes* and *Repeal the 8th*. The changed discourse and acceptance in the public and political domain of these voices and experiences, feasibly arose from changes in culture but also changed culture, such as the representation of motherhood in literature. Both scholarship of literary representations of Irish motherhood and Irish nonfiction in general is almost nonexistent so frameworks for the analysis of abortion and wider mothering narratives must rely on the existing studies of motherhood in Irish fiction, abortion discourse in the media, and analysis of abortion discourse in politics. Considering the erasure of mothering from history and the cultural ideals embodied in the persistent tropes of the Virgin Mary, Mother Ireland, and the Irish Mammy, it is reasonable to assume this erasure has impacted contemporary Irish nonfiction written, published and lauded in contemporary literature.

Much has been written about the gendered construct of national identity in the canon of Irish literature and discrimination against women in public life so I will not review here, but instead ask how perhaps this marginalization or dismissal of motherhood and pregnancy, let alone abortion, as banal, was part of the reason these Irish women writers who wrote about Ireland's abortion laws and campaigned for political change in 2018 had such an impact. Feminist scholarship, beginning with Adrienne Rich's seminal *Of Woman* Born (1976), contends that maternal narratives, by "unmasking motherhood" and "redefining maternal roles and subjectivities" are a key tool to redefining and reclaiming maternity from a patriarchal institution (O'Reilly 5). However, I contend that the blanket silence around Irish motherhood in contemporary literature, history and politics is uniquely persistent and so must be placed in context. Áine McCarthy categorized the limited representations of mothers in Irish contemporary fiction into three widely reproduced stereotypes: the Good Mammy, an idealized self-sacrificing provider of "self-less love and good dinners"; Moaning Mammy, passive and miserable type drained of life by her feckless/alcoholic husband and brood of children; and the Smother Mother, dominant matriarch who controls all aspect of her adult children's (sons' especially) lives. Across all three tropes, the Irish Mammy is pious, pure, devoted

to sons, demanding of daughters (and worse to in-laws), and supremely concerned with respectability and reputation among the neighbors/parish (114).

This Irish Mammy only comes into being after she has children and her agency and power are relational to other characters in the story. The reality of this woman's choice in pregnancy and motherhood is not part of her story because it assumes all women will be mothers by choice and their identity in Irish society will be shaped by this role. McCarthy argued in 2010 that "motherhood remains the great *terra incognita* in Irish literary criticism" despite (hard won) gains by Irish women writers in recent decades. Abortion, pregnancy loss and reproductive healthcare have been linked to national identity for Irish women, and yet their absence from stories and literature alongside the absence of autonomous mothers with agency, marginalizes these women and relegates their experiences to the private, domestic - unworthy of public value.

**The Silences**

In the Ireland where I lived and worked from 2005-2015, women did not speak about their abortions. In the Ireland where I managed community and social inclusion programs, service providers didn't talk or write about the reality of abortion in relation to social policy and service delivery so perhaps it's no surprise that the male-dominated Irish literary canon also didn't include the full reality of Irish womanhood. The thousands of women who travelled for abortions or were forced to continue their pregnancies did so in secret. As Ursula Barry argues in *The Abortion Papers Ireland: VOLUME* 2, women were spoken *about* in the public sphere while their fetuses and embryos were conceptualized to independent agent status. The criminal ban on abortion resulted in complete cultural (and literary) silence, on the experiences of 170,000 women who gave Irish addresses in UK and Dutch abortions clinics between 1980 and 2016 (Barton). Even when the plight of specific pregnant women and girls captured the nation's attention through high-profile court cases, such as the 2014 Y-case in which a young, pregnant

asylum-seeker who arrived in Ireland after being kidnapped and repeatedly raped was refused a termination despite threatening suicide, women were anonymous, rather than humans with agency.

The 2012 death of Indian-born Savita Halappanavar, a healthy 17-week pregnant Indian dentist, who died of sepsis because she was refused a termination during a miscarriage while the fetal heartbeat remained detectable. The medical staff managed her care through a relatively common "hands-off" approach that when investigated later was determined to be a "medical misadventure" (Holland). The country (and world) learned of Savita's pain and repeated requests for an abortion once the amniotic fluid had broken, miscarriage was inevitable and signs of infection in Savita presented. Her husband Praveen called her treatment "horrendous, barbaric and inhumane" (Lentin 179). Through Praveen, we heard Savita's words—her request for a termination and in response a baffling silence from nurses and doctor. Praveen, Savita's family and friends, and the media in India refused to participate in the ingrained "morality" debate on abortion and insisted the Irish abortion law resulted in medical negligence and the death of a woman whose pregnancy was not viable. This case shone an international spotlight on the previously silenced and secret stories of abortion in Ireland. I am somewhat embarrassed to admit that until I heard the news of Savita's death, I hadn't connected the bizarre and disturbing treatment of my own miscarriage the previous year in an Irish hospital to the 8th amendment and general status of women in Irish culture and law. In 2014, news broke of the 800+ infant remains in the septic tank at the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway, where unwed mothers were sent to give birth. In 2015, reports emerged of a child trafficking operation from the Home, under which more than a thousand children were sent abroad to be adopted to America, a practice sadly common to mid-century Ireland. These reports confirmed a particular kind of motherhood, a particular kind of womanhood, and deviating from these norms would result in a mother's erasure from their own children's stories.

Immigrant woman, particularly brown and Black, and Traveller women, an itinerant ethnic minority, have appeared only as letters, until the Repeal campaign, in horrifying cases in which raped,

abused and suicidal girls and women have petitioned for the legal right to travel to England for abortions. It remains a noticeable absence from motherhood narratives, fiction and nonfiction in all Irish literature. Ronit Lentin, a scholar specializing in race critical theory, and gender, located Halappanavar's story within the recent history of casting migrant m/others' birthing practices as threatening to the "integrity of Irish citizenship" for *The Abortion Papers: Volume 2*. Lentin also argues that the successful campaign for (limited) legislation that allowed for abortion when a woman's life was in danger, after Savita's death, exemplifies the intersection of victimhood and agency that migrant mothers occupy.

These silences are echoed in the pages of contemporary Irish nonfiction. Women have not been able to loudly narrate their own life stories in Irish literature; instead, they have been relegated to a supporting role of mother, temptress, or servant in other's works. Their bodies have been used to symbolize—as Hibernia, Mother Ireland, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, and the Virgin Mary—male-narrated versions of evolving Irish nationalism over time. According to Dr. Heather Ingman, "women were passive embodiments of Irish virtue," rather than individuals or a collective with agency in the shaping of the nation's literature. Edna O'Brien, the award-winning author whose early books were famously banned in Ireland, wrote *Down by the River* after the 1992 X case, in which a fourteen year old girl was raped by a neighbor (father in the novel), became pregnant, and when she sought an abortion in England, the High Court intervened to stop her from traveling. The Supreme Court found in favor of the girl, allowing that her life was in danger from suicide and that the life of the mother was compelling enough to allow an abortion. The girl miscarried before she could abort. International reviews criticized the novel for leaning towards manifesto rather than compelling plot and a 2002 analysis by Heather Ingman of Dublin City University argued the book might not be "political" enough because it didn't offer any strategy for replacing the existing national identity politics (Ingman 262-263). U.S.-based scholars have also analyzed O'Brien's work as "fiction [that] intensely interrogates the cultural and political imperatives that reproduce femininity in Ireland by showing the ideals…and the impossibilities of actually living up to

them" (Maloney 197-198). They go on to describe her writing in general as "attack[s]ing the foundation of Irish culture-state control of women's reproduction, and the nationalist and religious mythologies, Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland—that have framed and, therefore, limited Irish women" (Moloney 198). Despite the almost dystopian patriarchy built-in both the rural and urban through Mary's father who rapes and molests her at fourteen and lecherous judges and politicians involved in workplace sexual affairs, Brian Fallon, the chief art critic of the *Irish Times*, in his 1997 review of *Down by the River*, reduces her characters as "almost all unpleasant or unsympathetic" and appears to intentionally ignore the critique of Irish society, particularly the hypocrisy baked into Irish abortion laws.

Anne Enright's final lecture as the Laureate for Irish Fiction in 2017 titled "The Count: What the Figures Say About Being a Female Irish Writer Today" criticized the gender imbalance in Irish publishing, book reviews and the perception of women's writing by men. She also questioned the continued insistence that certain groups have more right to have a voice and bear witness to issues of national identity in their writing, a belief that is influential to the writing and publication of nonfiction because of its need for facts and an ownership of history. Despite Martin Sixmith's telling of Philomena Lee's story, and ongoing protests by advocates and survivors of these institutions, it wasn't until the discovery of a mass burial site of human remains outside a Galway mother and baby home that this contemporary abuse became part of a mainstream version of Irish social history. This discovery, after the international focus on Savita's death, was directly linked to the Church's historic influence on Irish abortion law and their attempts to exert moral authority on lawmakers and voters during the repeal campaign.

The most famous literary example of Irish motherhood—written by a man—is Angela, Frank McCourt's mother, memorialized in his international best-selling and Pulitzer-Prize winning *Angela's Ashes*. Despite the title, Angela's misery and passiveness, not herself, are the main characters in McCourt's telling of a poverty-stricken childhood in New York and Limerick. But I had read *Angela's Ashes* when still a high school student in the United States and relegated that martyrdom depicted alongside the no longer-

relevant words of the constitution enshrining Irish women as homemakers. In 2009, English journalist Martin Sixsmith published his best-selling investigation *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee*. Philomena Lee was one of the thousands of Irish women deemed unworthy of motherhood by Irish society. The Catholic Church, creator and enforcer of the "moral" law behind the imprisonment of unmarried (and others deemed unclean or unworthy) pregnant girls and women in institutions and the forced adoption of their children, of course wrote the most-famous and unrealistic narrative of motherhood in the birth of Jesus Christ by the virgin Mary, who also sacrificed her son for the moral good. On a lighter note, Irish comedians Brendan O'Carroll and Colm O'Regan wrote and performed "Irish Mammy" characters in various guises beginning in 2011. O'Carroll's Agnes Brown went on to star in a British sitcom, in which the long-suffering Irish mammy was played by Brendan O'Carroll. O'Regan began with a Twitter account documenting funny advice and tales from no-nonsense rural Irish mothers whose lives revolve around saving money and controlling all aspects of their children's lives. Like all stereotypes, the characters are relatable and humorous, but tired. Both men turned these characters into commercial success and O'Regan has just published a novel about Ann Devine, a rural Irish mammy.

What's notable here is that Irish women, especially mothers, have had much less commercial success publishing tales of a more realistic representation of Irish motherhood and maternal subjectivity. Caitriona Moloney and Helen Mahony, U.S.-based scholars in Irish literature and the editors of *Irish Women Writers Speak Out: Voices from the Field* (2003), note that "the foundation of Irish culture—state control of women's reproduction, and the nationalist and religious mythologies, Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland"—has framed all Irish writing and indeed limited any critical reception to women writing the stories of their own bodies. Anne Enright's memoir, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, first published in 2004, is a notable exception in its self-representation of motherhood. I didn't read it or know about its existence until after its U.S. publication in 2012, despite reading many of her novels. Enright, is, of course, primarily a literary fiction writer and it is perhaps because of this status that she was positioned to experiment with a

circular structure and fragments associated with the dazing experience of new motherhood, in a publishing context in which maternal ambivalence, agency and absence had yet appeared in literary nonfiction or journalism.

My goal here is to look at how maternal subjectivity has changed in Irish memoir/essay as a result of this movement, looking most closely at the award-winning essay collections by Emily Pine (June 2018) and Sinead Gleeson (Jan 2019), as well as works of narrative nonfiction by Caelinn Hogan (2019) and a memoir by Lynn Ruane (2018). These books are a sample of nonfiction by women published after the Repeal vote passed and most were written before or worked on during the years of abortion campaigning and storytelling in Ireland. I chose these titles because of their critical acclaim, popularity and diversity within the genre. The form, content and style vary in a way that represents the diversity of creative nonfiction. The books all narrate or investigate Irish experiences of abortion, unplanned pregnancy, pregnancy loss and moral agency within motherhood/womanhood identities—all experiences and themes largely absent from representations of motherhood in Irish nonfiction, and indeed literature.

**A Tale of Two Marys: Immaculate Conception and Penitence**

Caelainn Hogan's *Republic of Shame: Stories from Ireland's Institutions for 'Fallen Women'* is a journalistic and historical investigation of untold stories from the Magdalene laundries alongside her own reckoning with an unspoken family history of abortion and the impact of this cultural silence in her community and her changed understanding of Irish society. From the 1920s until 1996 thousands (estimates range from 10,000 to 30,000) unmarried mothers and other women deemed promiscuous or even "at-risk" of promiscuity were incarcerated by nuns and forced into grueling labor throughout their pregnancies. Their release usually was predicated upon signing over parental rights to their children. Hogan's book is structured around her own search to unearth the power driving Ireland's "shame-industrial complex," some at the behest of surviving women and children, during the years 2016-2017.

While the existence of and operations of these institutions were common local knowledge, calls by survivors and their children for information and redress, were largely ignored by the government and public until Galway-based researcher and advocate, Catherine Corless, discovered the probable remains of 800 babies and children in a septic tank outside a mother and baby home in Tuam, Co. Galway in 2014. The horror of this discovery received international press coverage and forced the government to form a commission in 2015 with the legal authority to investigate the experiences of woman and children in these institutions and issue reports of their work. The final report has yet to be produced. While the horrors relayed by women and children who survived the institutions reveal the extent of punishment meted out to woman that didn't fit the strict definition of mother accepted in private and public life, it is perhaps the seemingly mundane revelations by Hogan herself, family members, community members and staff that are the most revealing about the blanket narrative on mothers in Irish culture. The intensity and consistency of the silence perpetuated by all Irish society around the abuse doled out to these women relegated to the "other" makes the absence of authentic motherhood from Irish literature, especially nonfiction, understandable yet more infuriating in hindsight. It also illustrates the danger inherent in erasing the experience and value of stories of whole groups of society from the dominant and elevated canon of national identity.

The opening scene of *Republic of Shame* sets us in a Dublin park across from the house where Hogan grew up. Despite being steps away from her primary school and passed daily, she describes glimpses of a "stately blush-pink building surrounded by manicured slopes and gardens" tucked behind a high park wall and protected with a narrow gate, electronic keypad and CCTV camera. While she knew vaguely that 'the nuns' lived here, she didn't know which order owned it or much about them. Nuns were an ubiquitous presence in Irish education, health and other social systems and their presence was accepted without question by Hogan and her peers, even in the 2000s. A few years later and Hogan heads up the path to this house where she will have tea with the provincial head of the Daughters of Charity, the order

who ran the St. Patrick's Home: the largest institution of its kind in Ireland. Down the road from the Provincial House of the Daughters of Charity, stands Neptune House, which Hogan passed daily walking to the train stop that took her to secondary school. She didn't know its name or that it was an "infant hospital" run by nuns, with the assistance of young women who cared for the babies and trained as nurses, from 1930 to 1986. A former staff member told Hogan that even after starting work she still had no idea what a mother-and-baby home was or that they existed. Again, that these systems of control and abuse operated in plain sight yet with impunity from community oversight demonstrates both the lack of power and worth unmarried pregnant women held in their families, communities and society for their life stories to be so uniformly ignored, often despite their attempts at escape or reunification with their children.

Equally intriguing are the unsympathetic religious sisters profiled and researched in *Republic of Shame*. While the Irish State funded and authorized these institutions, despite awareness of the high mortality rates of infants and children, it is telling that they chose to accept these deaths as a seemingly natural result of their illegitimacy or even "proof of the mother's shame," and therefore less likely to be well-cared for by his or her mother, family or even foster carers. Nuns, not priests, though, were authorized by families and the State to care for these children and uphold the morality of the nation. The nuns in Hogan's book have little sympathy for the survivors of these institutions and in fact express a victimization at the hands of contemporary Ireland that seems to have forgotten its own betrayal of these women and children. They repeatedly try (and fail) to convey to Hogan that the shame of single motherhood would have meant these women and children would have experienced far worse outcomes if left to their own devices than they did under their "care." One Galway woman, described by the Sisters of Mercy in her 1959 admission record simply as "penitent-twice" told Hogan that the Magdalen Laundry she escaped from was "the most vicious place you could ever live." The cruelty and abuse were well-documented and inexcusable, yet the twisted entanglement between two types of women classified as "others" in Irish society is complex. The same woman recounts meeting a school friend, a novice with the

Mercy Sisters, at the laundry. Hogan summarizes segregation into different classes of women, neither real mothers, as one a "celibate bride of Christ" and one a "repeat offender." The book interrogates the distance from Irish mainstream these nuns in some ways occupied as unmarried women, and this relegation of women to the other, whether as a childless bride of Christ, a pregnant woman without a husband, a victim of sexual assault or abuse, or a pregnant immigrant, although differing in power and privilege, meant their voices were rarely heard in published history and literature. These women, while enforcing a moral code that punished women for sex and pregnancy, were on the spectrum of victimhood and moral agency inhabited by "others," such as migrant women, women experiencing infertility and women seeking abortion after rape or because of fetal abnormality diagnoses.

**The Agency of "Mother" Ireland**

As the Abortion Rights Campaign mobilized in the wake of Savita's death and the resulting public outcry, Tara Flynn and Roisin Ingle, two Irish writers and journalists, wrote personal essays about their own abortions for *The Irish Times*. These two essays started a wave of first-person narrative published in print journalism, online, spoken in video, read aloud from stages, and shared on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. These well-known figures in Irish public life were among the first women to unapologetically describe their choice to terminate an unplanned pregnancy without justification or apology in a nonfiction form. Their accounts, decades after the women's stories in Hogan's book, still identify an exile experienced by women facing unplanned pregnancies. Many of the women after being released from these Magdalene laundries moved to England to begin new lives, and attempt to escape the stigma and memories of their ordeals and take agency over their future. In contrast, the overwhelming emotion reported by Flynn and Ingle after their trips abroad (or temporary banishment) for terminations was relief. The ensuing emotional conflict in their cases was caused by being forced out of their home for medical care and then shamed into silence about their choice by Irish law and society.

Tara Flynn, writer and comedian, described the panic she felt as a 37-year-old single woman at discovering she was pregnant: "I hadn't wanted to be pregnant and felt in no way capable of parenting. The term is 'choice,' but it didn't feel like having one." Similarly, Roisin Ingle, long-time *Irish Times* columnist, wrote, "I was not in a relationship. I did not want a baby but I did know exactly what I wanted to do. I knew my own mind. I knew what was good for me. Even if my country doesn't think women know their own minds or think we know what is best for ourselves." What's notable about Flynn and Ingle's narratives is their refusal to accept the shame that had been heaped on their foremothers, their avoidance of the correct kind of motherhood as defined by the Catholic Church, and their rejection of their bodies by the State. They were not victims of their unplanned pregnancies, or bodies, or the actions of men, but rather moral agents forced to into secrecy by discriminatory abortion law.

These narratives, essentially previously nonexistent in Irish nonfiction writing, differed from the two dominant abortion discourses in the Irish debate because firstly, while acknowledging the "debate," they don't engage in justifying their actions or in narrating the emotions or rights of their embryos, fetuses or 'unborn babies.' Secondly, they are the moral agents of their lives and are clear that the stress and stigma felt by having an abortion was created by Irish laws, not the unplanned pregnancy or any regret or grappling with their choice to terminate their pregnancies. Flynn writes "to this day I haven't told my doctor" because she like "most women don't want to risk being judged in the safe space…at a moment in which they might already be vulnerable." Her personal choice not only illustrates her own reasons for secrecy but the wider impact that such stigma can have on women's access to informed healthcare.

Both writers frame abortion as an intergenerational issue using their mothers in their narrative and analysis of their silence until this point. Ingle's mother later revealed publicly that she had tried to procure an illegal abortion, before becoming a mother. This theme seems important to correcting the historical dominant narrative of an Ireland without abortion but also to ensuring women who have abortions are not easily confined to a role of "the other." Including their mothers' knowledge in the narrative, not only

highlights the potential for extreme isolation for women without this support, but it also unpacks the source of this "shame" that older generations of Irish women internalized. Both Flynn and Ingle were clear in their narratives that the stigma, which is perhaps passive shaming, and the active shaming or attacks on women for having abortions or even supporting the legality of abortion, were the villains and sources of any stress in their own experiences, not the pregnancy or termination. Maternal agency, in the words of feminist scholars (O'Reilly 17-19) involves women's "ability to recognize discursive constitutions of self and to resist, subvert, and change the discourses through which one is being constituted" (18). Like the survivors interviewed by Hogan, these women refused to accept shaming and othering discourse on abortion in Ireland, but this was possible only once/when women were safe and supported to share their stories.

By connecting Ireland's failure to legislate for abortion with the "vitriol of many who say their focus is life feel free to dispense," Flynn also places the blame for internal conflict on external factors and turns the Irish state into an active coconspirator in the broader misogyny inherent in "pro-life" rhetoric. "But the second I landed, I became a criminal. Guilty. Shameful. A killer. It didn't matter that I knew I was none of those things, like so many thousands before me (and an average of 12 every day since). I kept my mouth shut, like a good woman," she writes. The words "good woman" connect Flynn's personal account to a wider feminist perspective on gendered expectations in Ireland. Her certainty that she was not guilty, shameful or a killer also mirrors Ingle's declaration that she was "glad and relieved" after her abortion.

The truth telling across generations of families, particularly related to unplanned pregnancies and motherhood, was part of a wider movement to rewrite a history of Irish politics, society and culture in which women, working class, the poor and other minorities were often written out of seminal and routine events. It was also a rhetorical approach to changing public opinion as campaigners urged women to "have the chats" and bring the issue to the personal level with family and friends. A relative flood of personal stories and experiences began to appear on social media and in print and digital publications as the

campaign intensified. The goal here was to mobilize voters to repeal the 8th amendment and force lawmakers to legislate for abortion in Ireland but another outcome was authentic representations of maternal agency in the stories told about Irish womanhood and motherhood. The impact of the 8th amendment will now be linked to the history of the nation through nonfiction and historical writing.

A content analysis of print media in Britain (excluding Northern Ireland) during 2010 by public health researchers found that abortion was universally positioned as "controversial" and "unusual, atypical and which cannot be normalised, belying the fact that it is Great Britain's most often performed gynecological procedure" (Purcell 1144). The same study found abortion was frequently presented as a risk to women's mental and physical well-being in the long-term, placing women who considered abortion in the victim, not agent, role. The absence of discourse as abortion as a legitimate (and healthy choice) was notable. The authors argue that this absence places women who had abortions in a distinct category from other or "normal women". In the Irish context, as Smyth and others argue, this category of "other" or not normal women is also strongly linked to Irish identity and so places this category (and those that support their actions) as contravening national identity and allowed for their State to ignore them in their lawmaking. The first step to empowering mothers is of course to construct a collective reality that is close to the lived reality, and part of that reality is women (and mothers – almost half of women traveling to UK clinics for abortions already had at least one child) choosing not to have children or a child at any given time for a variety of reason.

It is the absence of this dangerous category of "other" women from representations of motherhood, and so womanhood, in Irish nonfiction that Ingle, Flynn, Hogan, Pine, Ruane and Gleeson have written into through personal narrative, research and cultural critique. "Other" in this Irish context is too broad a theme to be useful because the dominant mother trope or character is so narrow and didn't even attempt to include reproductive choice.

**Agency in Womanhood, Absent the Irish Mammy**

*Notes to Self*, authored by Emilie Pine, recounts her experience of family addiction, eating disorder, divorce, rape, menstruation, pregnancy loss and the expectations and silence exerted on women throughout these momentous, yet common, events or conflicts. The book was published by Tramp Press, an independent publisher that had only previously published fiction, and became a word-of-mouth bestseller in Ireland.

*Notes to Self* is not a book about motherhood but the institution of motherhood and its influence on the experience of womanhood seem present in every essay, including the opening story of her father's liver failure. Pine's competing emotions while mothering her ill father, who himself was "never shy about sharing how happy he is to relinquish the duty of care towards his children," speak to the gendered perspective on addiction and caring that places very different social punishments on women and men who shirk these responsibilities but also introduce the reader to a narrator experiencing some of the ambivalence and resentment present in narratives with maternal subjectivity. She writes of a similar guilt because again these experiences of caring, linked to mothering in our culture, are so far from from our understandings of power and control.

Pine's essay about infertility, pregnancy loss and the decision to giver herself permission to be "someone other than a mother" speaks directly to the ban on abortion and its impact on the Irish system of maternity healthcare. Her experience of the Irish health system, as a pregnant patient, is both universal to the sexism documented around women's medical care and specific to a health system that bans abortion and protects a fetus, regardless of the wishes and health of the patient. Like all the narrators in these books, Pine relays her surprise and confusion at the impact the 8th amendment could have on her own health. Refusing to provide abortion care for an unplanned pregnancy is one small part of the system operating in a culture of fetal rights. During her pregnancy Pine agonizes, with no care or information, between bleeding, suspected miscarriage and a confirmation that there is no heartbeat, for over a week before anyone will confirm her pregnancy is not viable. "We can't say anything. You'll have to come back

in a week," is HSE-speak for *there is no heartbeat detected but there is fetal growth* and the author only understands in hindsight that the equal status of the fetus means "ambiguity"—not ambiguity about whether there will be a baby or not but instead that the fetus is prioritized over the patient and "total disempowerment of us as 'parents' of this ambiguous pregnancy." The silence of the midwives, when presented with Pine's grief and request for answers, represents decades of silence in which rights and dignity have been denied to Irish womanhood in order to protect the image of motherhood as an Irish institution.

While this cloak of silence, almost terrifying in the uniformity of absence it represents, figures in all the works, it is sadly a feature in the re-telling of Savita's final days in official records because her voice is gone. The line between all the narrators' chosen silence about pregnancy loss or abortion, as a right to medical and social privacy, blurs with an official or expert silence in the place of needed advice or information, and a white washing of Irish history by a canon and record written until the woman must untangle the reasons behind their own and encountered silences on certain topics. It is hard not to remember details from the Halappanavar inquest relating to this code of silence, while reading Pine's account of her miscarriage. During the inquest two midwives, key witnesses, refused to give evidence, and were exempted for unspoken medical reasons. The clinical notes were riddled with blanks—critical lab results, communication between caregivers and markedly, none of Savita's requests for a termination were present, as noted by Dr. Peter Boylan, an expert witness. Boylan, an obstetrician and gynecologist and former master of the National Maternity Hospital reviewed the case and provided background evidence on sepsis in pregnancy. He noted that preparations should have been started for a termination before Savita's health became critical because this procedure was usually delayed by the conscientious objections of midwives who refused to assist in the procedure. Holland in her reporting also points out that never once was Savita consulted with or listened to when considering her care or even when considering the negligence she experienced. Her body and her voice were asking for help, but this was secondary to the

fetal heartbeat so all her critical signs, including her own request, were ignored. A question never raised then or since, was why the doctor didn't save her life, regardless of the Irish legislation? Because the 8th amendment cost Savita her life, public debate focused on the need for law change, but the cultural attitude scared me more—surely doctors and nurses should have saved her life and worried about their own legal consequences after? How little were women worth before they actually had a baby in the health system? While Pine later tries to conceive after her miscarriage, she realizes her desire and failure to be pregnant are represented by the fertility industry as a problem of being. A problem with a solution that seems to require a full personality and life metamorphosis to be maternal—couched in the language of understanding her body and living a more "balanced" life.

In *People Like Me*, author, activist and politician Lynn Ruane writes the flipside of Emilie Pine's fertility struggle and conflict with the choice to accept a womanhood that doesn't include motherhood. Ruane became pregnant at fifteen. She returned to school, raised her daughter and began a career of community-based drug abuse intervention in social housing estates. After years of direct service work Ruane, as a single mother of two children, studied for a degree at Trinity College Dublin, was elected students' union president and, in 2016, to the Seanad, the upper house of the Oireachtas (Irish legislature). Neither Pine nor Ruane could fit any of the Irish Mammy types—one because of infertility and the other for her fertility, demonstrated by an unplanned pregnancy as a teenager, and later second pregnancy without marriage. The memoir incorporates both Ruane's perceptions of her childhood and parents, who she later learned were not married because of her dad's previous marriage, along with later adult reflection and interrogation of her behavior and emotions as a child, teenager and young mother. The adult narrator's consciousness and knowledge of the impact of poverty, addiction and social policies impacting low-income communities is a constant presence that is also applied to her own experience of motherhood.

Ruane writes about the importance of voice to her—feeling like her voice had worth, using her voice for others and giving the often-invisible communities living with effects of addiction, poverty and

trauma a voice in the public realm in Ireland. The times in her past in which she didn't speak or wasn't heard are described as shame-filled. As a young single-mother working for an education so that she could provide choices for her daughters, Ruane writes with regret about being less "maternal" than she thinks her children deserved. She describes herself as "practical and driven and little shouty" and "not a fun mammy" and wishes she'd spent more time minding her children. As a reader, it's easier to see that Ruane could not have been the force for change in her own life or for her girls and her community, without committing to university and work. She faced impossible choices and shirked the three Irish mother stereotypes, as well as the qualities associated with Mother Ireland, and claims her right to shape the national identity through political action and her storytelling. Ruane's narrative and reflection constructs maternal subjectivity unique in contemporary Irish literature, and part of this is her writing about her work during the repeal campaign and the emotions felt across generations of her women in her family and community.

The 2019 essay collection *Constellations: Reflections from Life* by Sinéad Gleeson also constructs a maternal subjectivity which includes Gleeson's perspective on her own past as a woman undergoing chemotherapy for blood cancer and facing a possible pregnancy scare and a medical system that wouldn't provide her the treatment of an abortion if needed, as well as her experience of multiple votes on abortions, first as a young woman and second as a mother to a daughter. She also narrates her experience as a daughter with a serious illness, being mothered by a single aunt, and the legacy of Ireland's hidden women struggling in silence and her own identity as a woman, writer and mother. Where Ruane's story centers on voice, both thematically and in its form, Gleeson's essays are grounded in the body and the prose in metaphors of mapping the body to life. Because of Gleeson's own expertise as a literary critic and editor of anthologies of Irish women's writing, she writes directly to the issue of Irish identity being synonymous with male identity in Irish literature and the impossible stereotypes faced by women, such as the revered the impossibility of a virgin becoming a mother and simultaneous prohibition of women from

any role in the Church's hierarchy and authority (Hennessy). This contradiction has been baked into the modern state and remains enshrined in Article 41.1.2 of the Irish Constitution, even after removing the controversial eighth amendment.

Gleeson reflects on the collective historical trauma, alongside her personal reckoning of her past vulnerability as an oncology patient in Ireland, while canvassing for a changed future for her daughter in the essay, "Twelve Stories of Bodily Autonomy." Two days after first knocking on doors to recruit "Yes" voters for the repeal referendum, she visits her oncologist and remembers a birth control problem during her leukemia treatment fifteen years earlier. The life-saving drug integral to her treatment also caused severe fetal damage. Sitting with the same doctor, she tries to avoid wallowing too long in the "what-if" scenarios that could have meant she was too ill to travel for an abortion, she was stopped from traveling, her treatment stopped to protect the pregnancy. She reminds us that women were turned into letters—the X case, the Y case—as they took legal cases seeking the right to control their body, their motherhood and that this act while a measure of privacy, amounted to erasure. "Women alphabetised and, as a result, anonymised. It is easier for those opposed to the wishes of these women to negate them if the reality of their lives is represented merely as a letter" (217).

Grounding readers in the bodily facts of motherhood and the vulnerability and strength of women's bodies, her stories insist on a collective reframing of Irishness around women and mothers in which their voices are worthy of inclusion in the literary canon. This collection was the first Irish memoir/nonfiction work in which I saw the disparity between Ireland's recognition of motherhood and my own experience of Irish motherhood, as an American living abroad, on the page. Not only did I not fit the trope of an Irish mammy/good mammy by simply choosing to live away from my own family and country, I never wanted to be a martyr and yet found myself growing smaller, quieter and angrier as my physical and emotional needs suddenly were expected to disappear.

**Conclusions**

It has been easier for those who want to negate the real power and consequences of motherhood by ensuring our lives were represented by symbols or stereotypes that relegated our voices mute outside (and often inside) the home. As Kathleen MacMahon, the granddaughter of world-class short story writer Mary Lavin, recently wrote upon the release of her novel, Irish women writing fiction were always tackling the serious and weighty subjects of life – their writing was just dismissed as "quiet" regardless of the loud themes. Prior to the 2018 referendum, women writers did tackle the Irish abortion experience in several novels by Marian Keyes, Paula McGrath, Lisa McInerney, Claire Hennessy, Sarah Breen and Emery McLysaght. Hennessy, an author, literary critic and editor, wrote about the restrictions placed on the promotion of her novel *Like Other Girls* by Irish media in 2017. Hennessy was not allowed to speak about "abortion" on Ireland's radio and television airwaves despite her protagonist traveling to England for an abortion. She also wrote about these "sneaky abortion novels" released prior to the referendum and her belief that the reality of abortion is a challenge for fiction writers because there often isn't a conflict. Hennessy argues the lack of drama in a protagonist "choosing the right option for her" makes for "terrible fiction" and so the conflict in these dramas lay in the pressure created by Irish law and society making women travel in secret for abortion care, not the procedure itself.

Despite the recent commercial and critical gains by Irish women fiction writers, nonfiction had proved a more tenacious strong hold of the patriarchy until the story and truth telling by women around abortion, and ultimately motherhood, bypassed the usual gatekeepers of truth and identity with social media and collective action. These stories proved powerful—they resulted in a clear majority-vote to legislate for abortion. They demonstrated the danger inherent in allowing a stereotypical Irish mammy trope to dominate the representations of Irish motherhood, in the past, present and future and they migrated from social media to traditional publishing. Authors like Ruane, Gleeson, Hogan and Pine are constructing a more accurate history of Irish motherhood by interrogating the role of abortion and the

reproductive choice not to have a child on Irish women. The existence of abortion and the attempts to deny its existence are both integral elements to a realistic portrayal of Irish motherhood as an institution—a critical first step to creating a version of empowered motherhood, while unique, isn't an Irish mammy stereotype and doesn't rely on the repeated sharing of trauma and hurt by Irish women to compel public change.

On the evening of the vote, Ruane describes meeting up with Tara Flynn, Roisin Ingle and Sinead Gleeson to nervously wait for the results. For these women, and the nation, this was a statement on whether woman had agency and autonomy to choose a motherhood in which they were equal, dignified and respected members of society. For women like Tara Flynn, who had chosen a womanhood autonomous from motherhood, it was a statement on whether "Ireland would welcome home" women, like her, who'd been rejected for decades because of abortions and unplanned pregnancies. For readers and critics, their contributions to nonfiction writing are integral to reclaiming or rewriting the Irish mammy trope limiting to woman in Irish literature.

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