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Introduction

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Introduction: Neoliberal definitions of a new sexual world and the revitalisation of gender studies

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Feminism and gender studies are re-emerging as significant if fragmented forces in contemporary academic scholarship and bottom-up activism. Following the crises of definition and politics that marked the 1990s and early 2000s, questions of gender justice and equality are now gaining urgency in response to the ever more complex neoliberal capitalist and political appropriations of feminism and gay rights. Indeed, Angela McRobbie sees a triumphant neoliberal popular culture as organising and defining a new sexual world. The founding of *Sibéal* in 2006 as a network for postgraduate students working in the field of gender studies across disciplines is evidence of the revitalisation of gender studies scholarship and politics. Six years since its foundation, *Sibéal* continues to create networking opportunities for postgraduate students, run annual conferences, maintain an informative website and keep feminist and gender politics on the agenda.

This special issue of *Socheolas* brings together papers from the 2011 *Sibéal* annual conference held at the University of Limerick and entitled 'Feminist Scholarship, Activism and Creativity'. This conference opened with artist Evelyn Glynn's moving exhibition of oral histories and photography which captured the confinement and social control of Magdalene women in twentieth-century Ireland. Similar forms of sexual

regulation in Spain were analysed by Cinta Ramblado and the work of the 'Justice for Magdalenes' campaign was discussed. The obsession with reproducing a respectable kin-based Irish nation shifted in the 2000s to the maternal bodies and rights of immigrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women whose sexual behaviour was subjected to rules of decency, modesty and assumptions of white heteronormative family formation, to the extent that these women's human rights were violated and the rights of their children to citizenship were withdrawn.

Alongside immigrant women's maternity, other forms of maternity have also come under the regulatory gaze as continuing obsessions, stand offs, silences, prevarication, or simply inactivity surround lone maternity, gay maternity, queer families, abortion, reproductive rights generally, reproductive technologies and surrogacy. Moreover, the use of technologies for assisted conception and the local and global transactions in reproductive body parts and the intensification of the global sex trade are all new and urgent sites of contemporary feminist debate and politics.

The more diffuse and pervasive forms of regulation in the contemporary context of neoliberal global capitalism involves not just sites such as family and reproduction but wider contexts of geopolitics and consumer capitalism. So from the broader perspective of local and global politics, gendered symbols such as headscarves, beards and male and female circumcision have become signs of religious antagonism and incompatibility - the battlegrounds of religion in our modern world. The deployment of 'western freedoms' especially with regard to women tactics of shaming and torture in Abu Ghraib, but also in legitimating wars, obscures a neoconservative turn to heteronormative gender

complementarity and the ‘traditional’ family in the popular culture and politics of the global North.

By locating repressive gender relations in the global South and in ‘other’ cultures, shifts towards gender conservatism and inequalities are more likely to go unnoticed. Indeed, representations of gender equality and gay rights across European countries are mobilised to shape narratives in which Muslims are framed as non-modern subjects. Across these contexts, gender equality and gay rights have become flexible signs of Western liberal democracy and ‘modernity’ which are posed against the repressive ‘tradition’ of cultural ‘Others’.

But feminism and gay rights are not only misrepresented and appropriated in the service of racist geopolitical and domestic political agendas. Neoliberal capitalism, according to Walby, is producing a commercialised and competitive approach to intimacy this is linked to the infusion of popular culture with hyper-sexualised imagery. For Angela McRobbie, such apparently liberalising discourses suggest a celebration of the freedom of young women in particular while actually producing new modalities of exclusion. Indeed, children learn to engage with body projects at a young age – learning to become consumers (see, for example, computer games such as ‘Moshi Monsters’ for 8 year olds), learning to discipline themselves as they focus on every single aspect of appearance and come to see sexual appeal and consumption as routes to empowerment, thus turning away from politics and the public sphere as sites and means of change. Thus, the proliferation of what McRobbie calls ‘faux feminist’ language and images of empowerment and entitlement in marketing and advertising requires feminist responses that

are as agile, captivating and pervasive as those of neoliberal consumer culture.

These are just some of the serious challenges that confront feminist and gender related scholarship and its capacity to intervene in very powerful economic and political forces that are mobilizing and appropriating notions of feminism, women's sexual freedom and liberated gay sexuality as central to the promotion of profit and imperialism. The political commitments and intellectual engagement evident in the events and papers presented at the 2011 *Sibéal* conference are a source of inspiration and hope. Moreover, the health and vibrancy of *Sibéal*, as well as the many new and longer running feminist organisations including: Limerick Women's Network, Feminist Open Forum, Irish Feminist Network, AkiDwA, Marriage Equality, Justice for Magdalenes, Linc and Belfast Feminist Network, are testimony that activism, campaigning and scholarship are alive and well in Ireland. We might well ask how effective these initiatives, networks and activist groups can be in the face of such powerful and diffuse forces and whether they are strengthened or weakened by the disparate and often unconnected nature of their activities. However, a diversity of groups and tactics seem appropriate to this neoliberal moment once strategic alliances can be forged and differences are critically engaged and embraced as strengths rather than threats.

The articles in this collection address topics from civil partnership, marriage equality and migration, to representations of women in art, film and Young Adult fiction thus opening up and extending questions of feminist and queer scholarship activism and creativity in innovative and productive ways. The range and urgency of the articles fundamentally

challenge the defensive and fearful assertions that gender and sexuality are not legitimate matters for scholarship – a view still held by many within the academy and beyond.

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