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Book Review: Male Dominance and Expertise in the Remembering of Irish Women's Lives

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Book Under Review

Ryan, Paul. 2012. *Asking Angela Macnamara: An Intimate History of Irish Lives*. Newbridge, IE: Irish Academic Press.

In his debut academic publication, sociologist Dr. Paul Ryan employs a clever qualitative content analysis by exploring an advice column of Angela Macnamara, the 'Dear Heloise' of postcolonial Ireland in the period between 1963 and 1980. Macnamara's writings offer a window into the changing intimate lives of Irish young people, married couples, and gay men in a time of considerable social, political, and economic upheaval. *Asking Angela* remembers an Ireland emerging from an era of isolationism, censorship, rurality, and economic restriction. Ireland of the '60s and '70s now contends with television and other new medias, increased global ties, and the waning power of the Catholic Church. This era was a turning point for Irish culture, and this book offers a rich analysis of the period written and retold by those who lived it.

Asking Angela primarily relies on a content analysis of questions submitted to *The Sunday Press* and Macnamara's replies. A sample of this kind will hold considerable bias, as the reader is only made privy to those questions that Macnamara determined to be relevant and that the editor was willing to print. There was also the problem of not wanting to affront the omnipresent Catholic Church. Macnamara was regularly forced to restrain her advice, often to the terrible detriment of vulnerable children, women, and gay persons invariably influenced by her perceived expertise. Ryan addresses this problem of bias by incorporating a contemporary interview with Macnamara herself, men who lived through the era (both gay and straight), and recollections from his own family history. It is a strategy that is refreshingly honest and necessarily critical of the false objectivity that plagues many social analyses.

Ryan's qualitative triangulation successfully crafts a rich story that is appropriate for younger scholars who did not live through the time of conservative Ireland in transition, but also for non-Irish readers who will find themselves eased into the nuances of Irish life often with helpful comparisons to similar cultural trends in North America and Europe.

The subjective choices in methodology, however, created some dilemmas. Namely, the focus on men in the interviewing phase, while designed to bring some humanity and complexity to the harsh depictions of men in Macnamara's column, ironically came at the expense of women's visibility. Women's perspectives are primarily relegated to their pleas for dignity, safety, and comradery in circumscribed letters. This editorial choice is intentional, as Ryan is hoping to bring men's intimate experiences to light. He is correct in pointing out that research in Irish masculinities is scant, but it is also the case that the disciplines of Irish history and politics have been predominantly *men's* stories, with women's experiences regulated to the margins in "women's studies" and auxiliary contributions (Aretxaga 1997; Hayes and Urquhart 2004). Excluding women from this retelling of changing Irish private life risks replicating this pedagogical oppression.

There are at least two significant consequences that emerge as a result. First, gay women and lesbians were rendered almost invisible in the book's discussion of changing perspectives on sexual orientation and homosexuality. As is typical in mobilization efforts and mainstream queer studies, women are frequently subsumed within the larger narrative of gay men (Gould 2006; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008). Another unfortunate oversight made possible by the erasure of women's voices was the near clinical discussion of marital rape and abuse clearly evidenced in Macnamara's column as a constant way of life (or state of survival) for Irish women. Many readers, particularly survivors of sexual violence, will find these chapters highly triggering and mentally fatiguing to read. It was so important that Ryan incorporated his own biography into the writing and bravely offered his own life experiences and thoughts to bring reflexivity to his analysis, but this human element was largely absent in the more objective reporting style delegated to the systematic misogyny that surfaced in Macnamara's column.

Indeed, a stronger feminist praxis would have been helpful overall. For instance, Ryan makes a point to counter the stereotype that men were uninvolved with housework, supporting this through interview responses from his male respondents. However, sociological research has demonstrated that men consistently over-report their involvement in the

household (Cunningham 2008; Press and Townsley 1998). That is, their attitudes and behaviors are not aligned. The men that Ryan interviewed, cued to reminisce on family life in their younger days, were likely constructing memory and identity to suit the interview and their socially desirable sense of self. Asking women for their perspectives on this matter would have been vital, as major discrepancies between men's reports and women's actual receipt of household assistance were likely present.

While *Asking Angela* takes the reader back to a time when strict gender roles were enforced, it would have been useful to learn more about deviant cases. For instance, what about women who did not get married, cohabitated, or who chose to be child-free? As with lesbians, heterosexual women who remained single were not mentioned aside from their fast track to emigration. Their stories add a much needed dimension to Ireland's story, as their invisibility and absence is just as important in the twentieth century creation of the idealized Irish home life. Some of these records are explored in Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart's (2004) volume *Irish Women's History*, notably Sharon Lambert's (2004) contribution on the experiences of Irish immigrants in Britain and Áine McCarthy's (2004) chronicle of deviant women (spinsters and 'defiant' daughters and wives) who were disproportionately institutionalized in asylums for the insane. The growing attention paid to the horrors of the Magdalene laundries in recent years also begs us to draw attention to those who fell off the margins of Macnamara's column. For Macnamara and Ryan, women exist almost exclusively as mothers, daughters, and wives, but rarely persons in their own right. Including them in the interviews would have been an important step toward their acknowledgement.

Although gender roles are examined in a rather tempered manner, Ryan does highlight how the Irish Gay Rights Movement and the feminist movement gradually improved the lives of Irish persons. As such, it would be disingenuous to describe *Asking Angela* as a conservative text. Although he shrinks from an honest discussion of rape, Ryan does identify how feminist praxis crept into the bedroom and began to transform institutionalized marital violence and female trafficking into something that at least begins to consider that women are sentient partners in the practice of sex. Ryan, himself, is at the forefront of Irish gender studies,

having examined gay rights mobilization and the politics of male sex work in the Irish state in his other endeavors (Ryan 2006, 2016). The impact of these movements cannot be understated, as they dramatically increased individual autonomy, introduced democratic consensus in the family, and eroded the outdated belief that gay boys and men were psychologically or spiritually damaged. For scholars of gender, sexualities, and Irish culture, *Asking Angela* provides a personal and intimate portrait of a postcolonial nation torn between British and religious oppression and the influence of pop media, technologies, and interconnectedness.

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