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Politics as Usual? Theatre, the Northern Irish Assembly, and the Romanticization of Normality

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This article explores the treatment of Northern Irish electoral politics in two plays featuring Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) as major characters. Between 2007 and 2016, many viewed the stability of the Northern Irish Assembly as evidence of the continued success of the peace process. Although the principle of mandatory coalition at the system's heart bears witness to the lasting nature of divisions within the state, the collaboration between once-bitter enemies demonstrates a real shift in Northern Irish politics. Until the institution's (perhaps temporary) collapse in 2017, many commentators and politicians suggested that its success proved that the state was progressing in the nebulous but desirable direction of 'normality'. Colin Bell's *God's Country* (2010) and Rosemary Jenkinson's *Planet Belfast* (2013) suggest, however, that a valorization of normality obscures the dangers posed to Northern Ireland by problems that occur on more global levels. *God's Country* explores the dangerous impact of homophobia in the North, and particularly within unionist politics, while *Planet Belfast* depicts the combined threat of environmental destruction and corporate interference. Both plays depict Northern Irish politics functioning smoothly, with minimal evidence of sectarian divisions deeper than the partisanship present in most democracies. In spite of this, however, they caution against treating normality as an end goal or as evidence that the state is safe. Instead, they suggest that the state faces a wide array of problems that have been obscured by the focus on sectarianism and the legacy of the Troubles.

In the twenty years since the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (GFA), Northern Ireland has experienced a range of successes and setbacks. Although the GFA represented an important moment in the peace process, it did not bring that process to an end. A key goal of the post-GFA peace process has been the creation of a 'shared society' or 'shared future'. Politicians and commentators have deployed these phrases frequently, most notably in the Office of First and Deputy First Minister 2005 policy document *A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland*. In place of the word 'shared', however, one might substitute 'normal' (Community Relations Unit, 2005). Former Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Anna Lo makes this connection in her 2016 memoir *The Place I Call Home*: 'I hope it will not be too long before there is more "normal" politics in the Assembly than the divisive "identity politics" of orange and green' (Lo, 2016: 221). As the seat of the devolved government in Northern Ireland, the Assembly is frequently seen as a barometer for the health of the Northern Irish peace process. In this quotation, Lo sets up a direct opposition between the desirable condition of normality and the undesirable divided status quo. Yet while much of the current rhetoric in Northern Ireland romanticizes 'normality', it is clear normative societies are far from perfect.

Generally, the end goal of the ongoing peace process seems to be a Northern Ireland that functions similarly to other countries, particularly the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. In this view, success will have been achieved when the divisions between unionists and nationalists are no more prominent than those between political factions in these other countries. One of the dangers of this approach is that it has a tendency to equate the normal (as a relatively objective description of prevailing trends) with the normative (a value judgment about how the world should be). This shift towards normativity means that resembling other states becomes the goal not just of the peace process, but of the entire society; and that problems not unique to the North are minimized if not entirely dismissed.

This article examines two plays staged in Belfast that draw attention to the risks inherent in this line of thinking. Colin Bell's *God's Country* (2010) and Rosemary Jenkinson's *Planet Belfast* (2013) both use major characters who are MLAs to draw

attention to the ways that normative politics can still be dysfunctional and dangerous. Both plays were developed and produced by Tinderbox, arguably Northern Ireland's most important champion of new dramatic writing.¹ As part of its commitment to innovation, Tinderbox has been particularly interested in new kinds of stories about the North. Many of the plays they have produced deal with the legacy of the Troubles, but they have also worked to promote plays that, like *God's Country* and *Planet Belfast*, explore other aspects of life in the state. Indeed, *God's Country* was part of a series titled *True North*, whose publicity materials promised '[t]hree new dramas about life in Northern Ireland today'. Although cuts to arts funding forced the company to significantly restructure in 2015, it kept the development of new writing at its heart.

The goal of constructing an economy similar to that of other western, post-industrial nations underpins much of the state's normative rhetoric. As Stephen Baker and Greg McLaughlin observe: '[a] constant refrain in public debate about the peace process was the "peace dividend": the promise of economic prosperity and the consumer nirvana that would ensue from a political settlement' (Baker & McLaughlin, 2010: 12). In practice, this has generally meant that official policy focuses on attracting investment from global corporations, both by instituting financial incentives and by ensuring that the parts of the state in which transplanted employees are likely to operate are appealing (which frequently means 'familiar'). The most prominent evidence of success in this project is the increasing presence of the film industry in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the filming of many scenes from the popular HBO show *Game of Thrones* within the state has provided a secondary economic boost by attracting tourism. Yet, like most of the promised peace dividend, the money from these endeavors has not been equally shared across the society. As is the case in so many of the countries the North mimics, a significant wealth gap continues to exist.

The tension between Northern Ireland's divided past and its normal future is at the heart of much of the discourse around the state. Opinions on how close the

¹ For a more detailed look at Tinderbox's history, with particular focus on its creation and early years, see Grant (2013).

state is to this goal vary, but the desirability of normality is generally accepted with little question. The debates around the so-called 'peace walls' that separate sectarian neighborhoods provide a clear example of this phenomenon. The walls would be unnecessary in a normative society, and there is a general consensus that they should be removed. The proposed timeline for this removal varies however. In particular, residents living near the walls frequently feel that they are still necessary for public safety. So while they agree that removing the walls would be desirable, they see this as a long-term goal to be enacted once the state is more successfully normalized. Similarly, the idea that legacies of the past prevent true normality drives much of the 'Emerald Noir' crime fiction set in the North. These stories often feature crimes committed for 'non-sectarian' reasons (greed, jealousy, revenge), but show the detective navigating structures that still bear the mark of the state's divisions. In the BBC television show *The Fall*, for example, Gillian Anderson plays Stella Gibson, a detective from London assigned to find a serial killer in Belfast. Her job is made more difficult by the particularly political nature of policing in Northern Ireland. Due to the state's history of sectarian policing, the peace process established a Policing Board which gives politicians more direct power over the police force than they have in most countries. In *The Fall* this board is headed by Morgan Monroe, a unionist politician whose son was married to one of the killer's early victims. In order to protect this son, Monroe puts pressure on the police to quickly close the case. While the trope of powerful people interfering in police business is widespread in the thriller genre, the particular system in Northern Ireland allows this interference to be executed more directly and effectively.

The theatre created in the North since the GFA also frequently reflects these tensions between division and normality. David Grant, a former director of Belfast's Lyric Theatre, sums up the conflicting imperatives that have influenced theatre in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland:

So much of what the theatre is trying to wrestle with in the North is whether to try and disregard the heritage of violence and say we are now in a new dispensation, or whether to try and acknowledge that the surface narrative

of the peace process has hidden an awful lot of unresolved tensions and difficulties. (Grant qtd in Crawley, 2012: 15)

Grant's words outline a common theme in contemporary Northern Irish theatre: the desire to look forward optimistically and celebrate the real advances the peace process has allowed, while at the same time wanting to highlight the elements that have not improved. This framing still presents normality as the state's primary goal, however; the question is whether to support or contest the idea that the North has reached it or is near to doing so.

In contrast to this approach, the plays discussed in this article largely set aside the issues of sectarianism and the Troubles; and use politicians to explore the problems that the state will still face when and if normality arrives. Bell's *God's Country* focuses on Jamie, a gay man who returns home to the North for the first time in years and confronts his homophobic parents who rejected him. At the same time, his mother Patricia, a unionist MLA, is in desperate damage-control mode after going on a tirade against homosexuality in the wake of a homophobic murder. Jenkinson's *Planet Belfast* also focuses on an MLA: Alice, the only Green Party member in the Assembly. Her efforts to prevent the trials of genetically modified (GM) crops in the North are stymied when a representative of Amtrex, the company supporting the trials, uses her husband's current writing project to blackmail her into ceasing her efforts.

The plays demonstrate that a focus on normativity risks minimizing the dangers presented by factors other than sectarian division. Both center on problems—homophobia, environmental destruction, and corporate influence on politics—that the countries whose normality the state desires to emulate also face. The plays begin with elements of normalized politics, which are unappealing but generally acknowledged as inevitable, including backroom deals and a concern with appearances over substance. These initially-minor problems, however, grow until they represent major threats to the state's stability. Both plays have relatively happy endings for their main characters: Jamie is able to address much of his childhood trauma and discard his internalized homophobia, while Alice resigns from the Assembly but addresses her own destructive behaviors (especially alcoholism) and

reconnects with her husband Martin. On the larger social level, however, the plays offer little hope for the North. At the end of *God's Country*, Patricia agrees to deliver a speech before the murdered man's funeral, in which she will retract her earlier comments. Appalled by her hypocrisy, Jamie plans to attend the funeral, thereby outing himself and showcasing the extent of his mother's homophobia. Although the play ends before these actions take place, it seems likely that this will end Patricia's career. This might initially appear to be an improvement, but the play suggests it will only replace one kind of homophobia with another. While Patricia's overt bigotry is no longer acceptable, the subtler discrimination her aide Gillian displays has taken its place. Similarly, in *Planet Belfast*, Alice and Martin's joyful reconnection is quickly interrupted by news of a famine in a region of China where GM crops are the primary export. Without Alice in the Assembly to fight against the GM trials, Northern Ireland will probably face a similar fate. In both plays, the problems of normalized politics—including bigotry, corruption, and hypocrisy—have the power to severely damage and perhaps destroy the North.

Normality and the Northern Irish Assembly

The Northern Irish Assembly has often been treated as an indicator of the peace process's health. A well-functioning Assembly, this logic suggests, means a well-functioning society. Certainly, a look at the history of the North's legislative bodies broadly supports this argument. The Parliament of Northern Ireland opened in 1921, immediately following the creation of the state. Like the state as a whole, the Parliament was dominated by unionists; during the institution's 51 years, all Northern Irish Prime Ministers came from the Ulster Unionist Party. In 1972, during the early years of the Troubles, the Parliament was disbanded and Northern Ireland was directly ruled from Westminster. This lasted until the end of the conflict, when efforts to reinstate a devolved government began. Attempts in 1999 and 2003, when the peace process was still new and under negotiation, failed to produce stable governments, and direct rule was quickly restored.

After significant negotiations, the Assembly was reinstated in 2007. It surpassed many observers' expectations by completing two full terms, with elections in 2011

and 2016. *God's Country* and *Planet Belfast* were written, staged, and set during this period. At the time of writing, however, the Assembly was inactive. The Executive was disbanded and new elections were called in March 2017. However, following the election, the parties remained unable or unwilling to create an Executive. The particular structures of the Assembly and its Executive, which were largely established through the 2006 St. Andrews Agreement, made this collapse possible. The Executive consists of a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister who share power equally. Underneath them are ministers for specific areas including Health, Finance, and Education. All MLAs must designate themselves as 'unionist', 'nationalist', or 'other'. The largest party of the largest designation selects the First Minister. Thus far unionists have always been the largest designation, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has been the largest party within that designation. The largest party within the second-largest designation (thus far always Sinn Féin) selects the Deputy First Minister. Ministers are then assigned amongst all parties using the complicated d'Hondt system. The result is an Executive that includes input from all parties but has very little cohesion.

As a result of the body's complicated past, its mere survival was seen as evidence of a movement towards normality. As Feargal Cochrane notes, '[i]t would be fair to conclude that devolved government succeeded in its first full term (2007–2011) in delivering stability to Northern Ireland. Given the challenges facing the Executive and the wider society, this was no small achievement' (Cochrane, 2013: 242). He proceeds to argue, however, that the Assembly did little more than survive its first term. The power-sharing structure avoided the disenfranchisement that had, in part, led to the conflict, but it also created an inefficient government. As the Assembly moved into its second term (2011–2016) and beyond, frustration with this system increased. While some of this centers on the system's inefficiency, critics particularly object to the ways the structures prevent a normalized government. Many feel that the designation system writes sectarianism into the government's structure and discourages voting across sectarian lines. While many proponents of the system argue against this reading (in particular, claiming that the system simply exposes the

extent to which sectarianism continues to dominate the North), frustration remains common.² In many ways, this structure resembles the peace walls—both exist because ‘normality’ has not been achieved, and their ongoing presence provokes debates and discomfort.

If electoral politics do indeed provide an effective shorthand for the entire process, Northern Ireland will have reached normality when the Assembly (or whatever body might replace it) closely resembles the more straightforward parliamentary structures of the British House of Commons, the Republic of Ireland’s Dáil Éireann, or the devolved governments of Scotland and Wales. Lo alludes to this transformation when she contrasts normality with the ‘politics of orange and green’ (2016: 221). Lo was born in Hong Kong, and her 2007 election to the Assembly made her the first member of an ethnic minority elected to a significant position in the state. Indeed, commentators often use her success as proof of the state’s normalization (sadly, normality also seems to include exposure to significant racism). Another marker of normality may be when (if ever) sectarian issues cease to be a major topic for politicians. In March 2007, DUP leader Ian Paisley was widely quoted as promising a new government ‘not preoccupied with sectarianism or the threat of violence, but with bread and butter issues that matter to everyone in Northern Ireland’ (qtd in Dixon, 2008: 315). This theme has been echoed throughout the years of the Assembly. When elected officials focus on sectarian issues, commentators and callers to BBC Radio Ulster programs like *Talkback* and *The Stephen Nolan Show* frequently lament the ‘waste’ of time and money which could be better spent on more practical issues.

This movement towards normative politics has also shaped the ways politicians are viewed and depicted. As the peace process has stabilized, the decreasing power of individual politicians to bring about violence—either directly through paramilitary ties or indirectly by abandoning the structures that maintain the peace—has led to depictions of politicians that more closely resemble those in nearby countries. Sean

² For a more detailed look at the arguments for and against this arrangement see Dixon (2008: 315–20) (generally against) and Nagle and Clancy (2010: 43–72) (generally in favor).

Crummey's satirical radio show *The Folks on the Hill*, which aired on BBC Radio Ulster from 2001 to 2011 and was also made into a TV show, consisted of impersonations of major Northern Irish politicians including Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Peter Robinson, and Ian Paisley. The satire was fairly lighthearted, with a focus on personality quirks and imaginary behind-the-scenes political deals rather than serious issues. To cement the idea that the titular 'Folks on the Hill' (the hill in question being Stormont Hill, on which the Assembly sits) were ordinary politicians, they were joined by prominent political figures from outside the North including Queen Elizabeth II, Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, UK Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and US President George W. Bush.

Press coverage has demonstrated a similar movement towards normalizing the personas of hardline politicians. This was most obvious in the press's fascination with the friendship that sprang up between Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness in the year Paisley was First Minister and McGuinness was Deputy First Minister (2007–2008). The easy rapport between the former enemies when together in public earned them the nickname 'the Chuckle Brothers', a reference to the English children's comedy duo of the same name. Nick Hamm's 2016 film *The Journey* depicts the early stages of this transformation, celebrating the two men's ability to forge a connection despite past enmity and lingering distrust. Following McGuinness's death in March 2017, Paisley's widow spoke warmly about the importance of the friendship between the two men. This framing humanized the politicians, moving emphasis from their beliefs and political actions to their temperaments and personal relationships.

The treatments of Patricia in *God's Country* and Alice in *Planet Belfast* reflect this shift in the perception of politicians. In many ways the women are diametric opposites. Although Patricia's party is never actually named, it appears to be the DUP or a close facsimile; thus, Patricia is a longtime member of a well-established party known for its resistance to change. In contrast, Alice is a member of the Green Party, which has a minimal legacy in the North. In addition to being non-sectarian, the Green Party exists throughout the UK and Ireland (the Green Party in Northern Ireland operates as part of the Green Party of Ireland, but this body also has strong

ties to the Green Party in Britain). Most elected officials in the North come from parties only existing within that state (one exception is Sinn Féin, which also campaigns in the Republic of Ireland). Initially, the two characters reinforce the stereotype that Green politicians like Alice have a broader view of Northern Ireland's position in an increasingly globalized world than politicians like Patricia from more insular parties. As both plays progress, however, these differences fade and the women face similar pressures from both the Assembly and the larger politics of Northern Ireland in the early 21st century.

Both women's first scenes show them navigating a political world that puts emphasis on appearances and backroom deals, arguably the hallmarks of normative politics. *God's Country* opens with a non-realistic scene (the only one in the play) in which Jamie is ensconced in a nightmare about his brother Glenn's death, but quickly shifts to the Williamson's living room, where Patricia and her aide Gillian are preparing for the speech Patricia is to give that night. The occasion is a gala for the charity she and her husband Jim set up in honor of Glenn, who had cystic fibrosis (Glenn drowned while out in a boat with Jamie). It quickly becomes clear that Patricia has reservations about the speech Gillian has prepared. First, she questions its emphasis on scientific language, worrying that this erases God's importance. Gillian counters that the speech's audience will consist of many doctors and scientists, to whom this language will appeal. This interaction sets up the conflict that develops between the women throughout the play: Patricia wants to express her values without compromise, while Gillian's primary concern is that Patricia's image should appeal (or at least be acceptable) to the most voters possible. This conflict intensifies when they turn to a portion of the speech discussing the homophobic murder of Declan Campbell. Gillian worries that Patricia's hesitance to condemn the murder will play badly with more moderate voters, while Patricia does not want to do anything that could be interpreted as weakening her rejection of homosexuality. Since the scene moves on before the disagreement can be resolved with any certainty, the question continues to linger.

Similarly, *Planet Belfast* begins with Alice complaining to her husband Martin about the process of gaining support for her opposition to the GM trials. She seems

to have convinced Sinn Féin MLAs by promising support for cross-border initiatives and now hopes for a similar deal with an independent unionist MLA. The issue of GM crops and Alice's broader environmental commitments are not initially seen through an ideological lens, but through a pragmatic one. Indeed, Martin teases her (not entirely kindly) about being 'in cahoots' with Sinn Féin (Jenkinson, 2015: 195). While the image of Northern Irish politics had traditionally been defined by reluctance to work with other parties, Alice presents these deals as a basic fact of political life (albeit an annoying one). Just as Gillian in *God's Country* works to shape the ways Patricia publically expresses her views, Alice's interactions with her colleagues behind closed doors lack the ideological drive she displays in public.

Later, both women give speeches that highlight the increasing normalization of Northern Irish politics. Patricia delivers hers at the cystic fibrosis fundraiser, while Alice's is directed at farmers she is trying (largely unsuccessfully) to persuade to oppose GM crops. Neither Patricia nor Alice has written the speech herself, nor is either particularly pleased with it. Patricia expresses her concerns to Gillian in her first scene, while Alice frequently complains about Glynis, her offstage aide and speechwriter. Both speeches at least begin as trite and awkward—Patricia's will move beyond this, but only because she abandons the script to condemn society's acceptance of homosexuality. An early line in Patricia's speech notes her party's engagement with 'Tweets, Facebooks and MySpaces' (Bell, 2010: 31). The unnecessary pluralization of the social media sites reveals her lack of familiarity with these services, which presumably were included in the speech to connect with younger voters. It also invokes 'the internets', which became a humorous catch phrase used to denote a lack of technical literacy after US president George W. Bush used it. In performance Laura Hughes, who played Patricia, underscored this awkwardness by looking down at her notes carefully before each name, as if to refresh her memory of foreign terms. Similarly, Alice's speech to the farmers adopts a folksy, chummy style and makes unsuccessful jokes comparing the Assembly to a zoo or a farm. Thus, from the beginning, the plays present a version of Northern Ireland where normalized politics prevail. At this point, the systems seem to be working smoothly; there is not yet evidence of significant scandal, corruption, or even sectarian division. The lack

of connection between the politicians and their audiences is perhaps not ideal, but nor does it seem to be causing any particular problems (again, in *God's Country*, this changes when Patricia goes off-script).

The politicians' gender provides further evidence of the movement towards normality; both are women, as are their primary aides (albeit that Glynis never appears onstage). Neither play foregrounds the ways the characters' gender has shaped their political careers, however. Indeed, the only explicit reference to the subject in either play is a flippant remark from Alice that being a woman actually helped her. While meeting with Claire, the former friend about to blackmail her into abandoning her opposition to the GM trials, Alice comments that she rose to prominence in the Assembly due to a need to 'make up the numbers' of women (Jenkinson, 2015: 239). Since she makes this comment to a woman she distrusts, however, it is unclear whether Alice actually believes this (and if she does, whether that belief is correct).

The growing presence of women in Northern Irish politics has often been viewed as evidence of normalization. When Lo expresses a desire for more 'normal' politics, she specifically calls for 'more young people, *especially women*, who are well educated and capable to enter politics and to replace the old and tired rhetoric of "us" and 'them' with fresh ideas that will improve life for everyone in Northern Ireland' (Lo, 2016: 221, emphasis mine). While (as I explore later) the representation of women in government is a source of discussion and concern in many countries, in Northern Ireland it takes on a particular significance in relation to the conflict. Although many women participated in the violence of the Troubles, the most visible combatants were male. As a result, the conflict has generally been viewed as a problem between men. In this view, women are either passive victims or agents of peace. Nobel Peace Prize winners Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan used their status as mothers, and the links between this identity and the assumptions of creating and caring for life, to advocate for an end to the conflict. As Baker and McLaughlin outline, the television and film of the 1990s and early 2000s frequently presented the violence of the Troubles as a direct threat to the domestic sphere. In anti-terrorism advertisements as well as films such as *The Boxer* (1997), paramilitary members were presented with

a choice either to continue with politically motivated violence and see their families destroyed or to retreat from politics into the domestic sphere. Regardless of the characters' decisions, the narratives made it clear that the latter option was the only way towards individual and communal happiness. Thus, the increasing number of women in politics suggests that the conflict is increasingly in the past: either because women were fulfilling their roles as peacemakers by ending it, or because the conflict was seen as irrelevant to women, which suggests that it is now irrelevant to the electorate. In the two plays, therefore, the fact that the women's gender goes largely unremarked suggests that normality has been achieved.

The Dangers of Normalized Politics

As both plays begin, it seems that normal politics have taken hold in the North and that this is mostly a good thing. By the end, however, the plays question the second part of this idea. Although the increasing presence of women in politics suggests movement towards normality within the gendered context of the Troubles, it also ties to the question of representation facing much of the world. Alice's quip about her gender leading to her success demonstrates both that there are still relatively few women in the Assembly and that those who do succeed are often dismissed as tokens. Although the ideal of a normalized society may include relatively even representation for men and women, this is not actually the case in the places the North uses as a model for normality. The numbers of female representatives in British and Irish legislative bodies remain well below 50 percent; indeed the Welsh Assembly is the only house which is currently more than 35% women.³ Internationally, media and press coverage of female politicians often draws on traditional gender roles, meaning that women have to work harder to be taken seriously in areas that, like politics, are

³ Following the 2017 UK general election, 32% of Members of Parliament were women. In the devolved legislatures, Scotland is at 35% and Wales is at 42% women. In the 2017 Northern Irish election, 30% of those elected as MLAs were women; due to the failure to form a government, however, they did not actually serve as MLAs in a meaningful way (UK Parliament, 2017). Following the 2016 Irish general election, only 22% of TDs were women (RTE News, 2016). In all cases, except that of Wales, this was the largest percentage of women in the legislatures.

assumed to be the domain of men.⁴ In the UK, this was recently demonstrated in the much-criticized decision by the *Daily Mail* (never a bastion of feminism) to headline their 28 March 2017 story about a meeting between UK Prime Minister Theresa May and Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon ‘Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it!’ A photograph of the two women accompanied the story; they wore knee-length skirts, which did indeed reveal their lower legs.

Female politicians in Northern Ireland are also subjected to this scrutiny. In a May 2017 interview with the *Sunday Independent*, DUP leader Arlene Foster (who had been the First Minister and presumably will be again if the Assembly is reinstated in the near future) was asked to play a ‘word association’ game with the names of several Northern Irish politicians. For Michelle O’Neill, the leader of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland (and prospective Deputy First Minister), Foster chose the word ‘blonde’ and gave a description focusing primarily on O’Neill’s appearance. Ironically, earlier in the interview Foster had complained about her own experiences with sexism in politics (Horan, 2017). Similarly, in *The Place I Call Home*, Lo discusses the particular challenges female MLAs faced (Lo’s were, of course, increased by virtue of her race). She recalls how she decided how to use her first speech in the Assembly, a choice that took on particular significance for all MLAs given the newness of the institution:

One of the first motions for debate was on gender equality in the Assembly and many new female MLAs used that moment for their first speech. I chose not to, even though I agreed with the idea that the Assembly lacked proportionate female representation. I thought it would be repetitive and predictable for all the women to advocate on the same subject. I later delivered my maiden speech on the subject of affordable housing. I thought it was important to show that female MLAs were not only there to highlight women’s or family issues. (Lo, 2016: 146)

⁴ For example, Kittilson and Fridkin (2008) observed this trend in media coverage of elections in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Clearly, in 2007 (three years before the staging of *God's Country*), female MLAs were forced to think about the gendered dimensions of their political personas in ways that their male colleagues were not. Even though *God's Country* and *Planet Belfast* do not explicitly address the ways sexism may have shaped Patricia's and Alice's experiences in politics, most audience members will recognize that the two women, like female politicians around the globe, would have faced a tougher battle and more scrutiny than many of their male colleagues.

The plays also show both women struggling to balance their careers and family life. Again, the plays do not explicitly link these problems to gender, but both women's situations echo the familiar question of whether a woman can ever 'have it all'. In *God's Country*, most of Patricia's political career has been in support of her husband's; they had hoped he would become party leader, but a recent stroke removed him from public life. As she continues with her own career, she also manages his care. This includes both attention to his immediate needs and to his public image, so that he will be able to step back into politics (although it seems that she is deluding herself into believing he will make a sufficient recovery to allow this). Her political career also increases the tension on her relationship with Jamie. The decision to reject him after he came out was not connected to her career; rather, it was based on her personal religious beliefs. However, the need to manage the scandal following her comments on homosexuality means that Jamie is now a political liability, and that any potential for reconciliation (however partial) disappears. The issue of balancing family with a political career is even more prominent in *Planet Belfast*. From the first scene, it is clear that Alice's career is putting a significant strain on her marriage to Martin, who resents Alice's decisions to prioritize political commitments ahead of their time together. He also feels emasculated by having a powerful wife (a feeling that Claire plays on when trying to seduce him). At the end of the play, Alice announces that she will be leaving politics. She frames her decision as only partially due to Claire's blackmail. The more important factor, she claims, was discovering that the couple's difficulty conceiving arose from the physical effects of stress from her job (and presumably the alcohol she used to self-medicate). While

it may not be the case for all female politicians, for Alice it does come to a decision between career and family.

In both plays, the dangers still present within normative politics become increasingly clear when scandals threaten to engulf the MLA characters. In both cases, the scandals have little to do with the state's 'old' sectarian issues but instead mimic the kinds of scandals that politicians around the globe face. Following Patricia's homophobic tirade at the fundraiser, Gillian spends the rest of the play trying to convince her that damage control is necessary. To Patricia, her comments were in keeping with her party's traditionally forceful expression of Christian values; to Gillian, their lack of ambiguity presents a threat to the party's efforts to court more moderate voters. Patricia eventually agrees to give a statement before Declan's funeral, 'clarifying' her earlier remarks and condemning the killing, but Jamie's presence threatens to add fuel to the scandal. In *Planet Belfast*, Martin's dissatisfaction with his marriage makes him an easy target for Claire, who was friends with the couple at university and now (unknown to them) works for a corporation behind the proposed GM trials. She initially tries to seduce him but finds a more valuable weapon when he shares early drafts of a new book. This project argues that Northern Ireland has developed a 'victims industry' that exaggerates trauma in order to bring in outside money. Martin had already published a controversial book arguing that 'the Irish should actually thank the English for giving them the famine' because of the modernization that followed (Jenkinson, 2015: 211). If completed, this new book would cause even more of a stir and would damage Alice's career. Claire confronts Alice with these documents, giving her the choice between letting the GM trials bill quietly pass and having Martin's writings exposed. As previously discussed, Alice chooses to stand down as an MLA, both to avoid the scandal and because of the damaging effects of the stress on her marriage and body.

The plays' fictional scandals in many ways mimic the actual ones that have arisen since the Assembly was reinstated. While one might expect controversial stories about Northern Irish politicians to involve sectarianism or violent actions during the Troubles, the scandals have generally participated in the process of normalization by focusing on the universal themes of sex, money, and hypocrisy. This is most obvious

in the largest scandal to grip Northern Irish politics in the 21st century, that of Iris Robinson. Robinson was a DUP MLA and also the wife of then-DUP leader and First Minister Peter Robinson. In January 2010, it was revealed that she had an affair with a nineteen-year-old man (she was 61 at the time) and used her political clout to help him obtain government funding for a café. This was particularly noteworthy since she was an outspoken advocate of 'traditional Christian values'. In a much-discussed appearance on Stephen Nolan's radio show in 2008, she had described homosexuality as 'an abomination' and offered to put gay people in touch with a 'lovely psychiatrist' who had helped patients 'turn around and become heterosexuals' (Henry, 2008). Thus, the revelation of her affair checked all the boxes for a major scandal: it involved a taboo sexual relationship (between an older married woman and a much younger man), abuse of power to achieve financial gain, and the hypocrisy of a woman who expressed rigid Christian values committing adultery. Commentators embraced this scandal with such enthusiasm because it incorporated so many different elements of dishonesty, but there was also a tinge of relief to the coverage. This was a normal, non-violent scandal, such as might occur anywhere.

God's Country and *Planet Belfast* both explicitly invoke the Robinson scandal, although to different extents. *Planet Belfast* contains one short but telling reference: Claire tells her boss that her efforts to neutralize Alice will be successful. She comments 'her hubby's a bigger embarrassment than Iris Robinson', referencing the damage that Iris's scandal did to her husband Peter's career (Jenkinson, 2015: 244). The connections in *God's Country* run deeper; indeed the play, which premiered approximately eight months after the story first broke, was largely inspired by the Robinson scandal. The characters explicitly make this connection; both Gillian and Jamie invoke Iris Robinson when confronting Patricia. Most importantly, however, the connection was at the center for the marketing of the play. Newspaper story titles included 'Iris Robinson's homophobia "inspires" play' and 'Shamed Iris Staging a Comeback' (Bowcott, 2010: 20; *Mirror*, 2010: 19). *Sunday Life* even included a brief article written by actor Ivan Little (who played Jim), extending an invitation for Iris to come see the show (Little, 2010).

The references to the Iris Robinson scandal also highlight the relative vulnerability of female politicians. Unlike many male Northern Irish politicians who faced scandals, Robinson lost her political career and retreated from public life citing mental health issues. Fintan Walsh argues that this framing allowed the DUP to cast Robinson in the role of a 'female hysteric', a tactic that has long been used to marginalize unruly women. This was particularly effective since, as Walsh argues, Robinson's 'glamorous, loud and vivacious' public persona was already gendered (Walsh, 2013: 295). Patricia and Alice both also have gendered personas, respectively as the staunch unionist wife and the flirtatious defender of the earth. Like Robinson, both women seem to lack party support. Gillian warns Patricia that their party will not back her unless she does major damage control following her speech. Alice is the only Green Party MLA, so by definition cannot draw support from party colleagues in the Assembly. There is also no sign of support coming from the larger party organization, however. Again, neither play directly links this lack of support to gender, but given the history of scrutiny on female politicians, it is reasonable to imagine that men's careers would be more likely to survive such scandals.

In both plays the politicians face scandals that have some connection to Northern Ireland's specific situation, but which more closely resemble the scandals of normal politics. Patricia's strong conservative Christian values are closely tied to the DUP's history, but this specific manifestation could easily come from anyone with similar religious views regardless of their location. Gillian suggests that Patricia's ability to weather a scandal has significantly decreased with the success of the peace process. In the past, she and Jim had been 'lynchpins' of the process, and those in power (both within their own party and in the government as a whole) would have worked hard to protect them in order to maintain stability. Now, however, politics has normalized enough that Patricia has become expendable. Similarly, while Martin's controversial project discusses the Troubles, it is far more about modern-day corruption and equally indicts members of both sectarian communities. In Martin's view, Northern Ireland is committed to bringing in outside money and unconcerned about whether the services they offer are necessary. If Martin's ideas were to gain traction, the North could lose a significant amount of money. Whether or not Martin's argument

is correct, this would cause problems across both communities. If Martin is right, politicians and community workers who have been cynically milking a cash cow would be unlikely to give up their sinecures willingly. If Martin is wrong, withdrawing the money coming into the North to support peace initiatives could do real damage to victims truly needing help.⁵

This argument—that those in power in the North are conspiring to make the state seem further from normality than it actually is—makes the potential scandal in *Planet Belfast* fundamentally different from previous debates about victimhood in the North. These have generally centered on who counts as a victim of the Troubles and how sympathy and resources should be distributed among different categories of victims. This was central to the response to the Eames Bradley report of 2009, which included the suggestion that the families of people killed during the Troubles should receive a payment from the government. Since this might also include the families of those who perpetrated violence, it caused an uproar that overshadowed the entire document. Similarly, there has frequently been criticism of how resources are allocated to investigate violent acts from the Troubles. In particular, unionists often argue that too much money is spent investigating the past deeds of members of the security forces rather than those of republican paramilitaries. They often point to the Saville Inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday, which cost approximately £200 million. All of these previous debates have shared the conviction that there are a significant number of victims in the North who are still suffering, however. They merely disagree about how these losses should be prioritized and how limited resources should be allocated. In contrast, Martin's hypothesis is that all claims of victimhood have been inflated and that there already is a surplus of resources. Thus, both plays can be seen as reflecting the movement towards more normalized scandals.

⁵ It is difficult to say how much weight Martin's accusations should be given. Certainly, the victims' center in which he works supports his argument; it has money and technology but very few visitors. At the same time, it is unclear whether the center is representative. What we know of Martin's book on the famine suggests that he is not above courting controversy for its own sake. At the end of the play, Martin has decided to put aside his work, partially because of the effect it had on his wife's career, but also because he has lost confidence in it.

Neither play is optimistic about the North's future; the fact that these scandals are those of a normalized society rather than a post-conflict society does not diminish the danger they present. At the end of *God's Country*, there seems to be little hope that the North will become a substantially less homophobic place in the immediate future. If Patricia's homophobia was not representative of her party, the damage to her career might signal change. Gillian's behavior, however, demonstrates that bigotry is deeply entrenched. Patricia's aide represents a new kind of politics: one focused on optics and soundbites. Whereas the DUP was traditionally outspoken and resistant, their participation in the Assembly has required them to take a more conciliatory stance and present their (still hostile) views on homosexuality in less combative terms. Gillian embodies this shift and at least superficially resembles a political aide in Britain or the US more than she does Patricia. She is horrified when Patricia goes off-script at the benefit, but this is primarily framed as concern over the effect her words could have on potential voters. At this point, Gillian does not reveal her own thoughts on homosexuality, leaving open the possibility that she holds more progressive views. Any hope in this direction is dashed, however, when she arrives at the Williamson's house to find only Jamie's English partner Jonathon present. As soon as she understands the nature of the men's relationship, she lashes out cruelly, telling him: 'you disgust decent folk' (Bell, 2010: 67). At this point it becomes evident that the difference between Patricia and Gillian is not in their values but in their styles of presentation. Gillian is in many ways representative of the new breed of anti-gay politicians becoming prominent in many countries. The increasing tolerance for LGBTQ people means that the open denunciations Patricia (or her inspiration, Iris Robinson) favors are no longer acceptable. Now, the same feelings are couched more gently. While the reduction in explicit hate speech is certainly an improvement, the shift has arguably made homophobia more difficult to definitively identify and therefore more difficult to combat.

Homophobia continues to be a danger in the North, as it does in many countries. Although Northern Ireland is now the only place in Britain or Ireland where full marriage equality is not recognized, this was not the case in 2010 when the play was staged. At that time, same-sex marriage was not allowed anywhere in Britain

or Ireland, but civil partnerships between same-sex couples were recognized throughout. The failure of Northern Ireland to enact marriage equality is largely due to the DUP, which makes the consequences of Gillian's and Patricia's homophobia all the more striking. At the same time, *God's Country* consistently emphasizes that Northern Ireland's failure to embrace gay rights is not unique or a result of the state being inherently backward or savage. While Jonathon, who has always lived in London, is inclined to see it this way, he is challenged by the other characters. During his confrontation with Gillian, Jonathon implicitly admits that he and Jamie aren't out at the girls' school where they teach. Nor is the violence that took Declan's life limited to Northern Ireland: Jamie and Jonathon discuss a similar murder near their London home. While the threat of homophobia may be more obvious in the North, it exists even in progressive, multicultural London.

Indeed, the form homophobia takes in contemporary Northern Ireland is frequently indistinguishable from that of other countries. For example, news stories and court cases around the world have centered on whether businesses have the right to refuse business to gay customers based on the owners' religious beliefs. In 2008, a bed and breakfast in England refused to rent a double room to a gay couple, and in 2012 a baker in the US refused to make a cake for a gay wedding. Both circumstances went to court and have seen lengthy appeals processes ending at the highest courts. The issues at the heart of these cases are largely indistinguishable from the 2014 Ashers Bakery case, in which the Belfast bakery refused to make a cake with the slogan 'Support Gay Marriage'. While Northern Ireland's more conservative climate may make the expression of homophobia more common and socially acceptable, there does not seem to be a significant difference in the expressions' content. As *God's Country* suggests, the homophobia in the North does not arise primarily from the state's sectarian divisions, and so healing these divisions will be unlikely to address the problems facing the state's LGBTQ community.

In *Planet Belfast*, the dangers facing the North are twofold. First and most obvious is the threat presented by GM crops. Throughout the play, little suggests that Alice is wrong to be concerned about them. Claire puts up a defense, focusing primarily on their potential for combatting world hunger, but she is ethically compromised

enough that her words carry little weight. Any ambiguity disappears in the play's final moments. Here, Alice and Martin are celebrating their freedom and the positive effects Alice's resignation will presumably have on their marriage. This is brutally interrupted when they see a news report about massive starvation in the Yunnan province in southwest China. The report explicitly links this with the province's status as 'one of China's biggest growers of GM rice' (Jenkinson, 2015: 260). The descriptions mirror Alice's early predictions about the devastating effects of GM crops. On seeing the report, Martin states 'It's started', suggesting that this problem will not be limited to China (Jenkinson, 2015: 260). The comment is all the more pointed since, until now, Martin has expressed frustration and skepticism about Alice's environment efforts. The threat of widespread crop loss is particularly frightening in Ireland, given the extent to which the devastation caused by the 1845–1852 famine still lingers in the island's cultural memory. Although Alice's exit from Stormont has secured her own happiness, it has also removed any chance that the GM trials will be averted. The North is now in danger of destruction from environmental change, a risk it shares with the rest of the world.

While the play's final moments focus on environmental destruction, Alice's downfall also shows the North's increasing susceptibility to another danger: corporate interference in government. Amtrex, through Claire, presents Alice with a carrot and a stick: if Alice allows the bill to quietly fail she will receive a lucrative position; if she persists, the scandal will ruin her career. Although she has enough integrity to decline the bribe, she is largely powerless against the blackmail. While Martin's work provides Amtrex with a highly effective threat, without it they would presumably have found something else. Indeed, the original plan seems to have been for Claire to seduce Martin and use that for blackmail. Thus, the potential environmental destruction of the North is only one manifestation of the dangers of interference by international corporations.

Conclusion

At the ends of both *God's Country* and *Planet Belfast*, Northern Ireland has missed opportunities for growth. These opportunities are different from those presented in most works of art and literature that evaluate the state's ongoing progress, however.

Neither play depicts sectarianism or the legacies of violence of the Troubles as potential downfalls. There is no suggested danger of a return to the conflict or even a serious threat to the stability of the devolved government. Instead, the threats represent dangers that can be seen across the world: violence and ostracization due to homophobia in *God's Country* and environmental devastation and corporate interference in government in *Planet Belfast*. In many ways, the Northern Ireland of both plays has reached the normality that it craves; as with the scandals around Iris Robinson's affair, the conflicts they depict really could have happened anywhere.

Although *God's Country* and *Planet Belfast* focus on the limitations of normativity within electoral politics, other plays explore this issue in different areas. For example, as sectarian violence and overt prejudice has declined, the racism that the North shares with other countries has become increasingly obvious. At several points in her career Lo was subject to racist abuse, and many immigrant or non-white families have left their homes due to vandalism and threats of violence. Many recent plays reflect these issues: Daragh Carville's *This Other City* (2009) looks at sex trafficking of Eastern European women in Northern Ireland, while Owen McCafferty's *Quietly* (2012) ends with a Polish bartender preparing to defend himself from an imminent mob attack. As with *God's Country* and *Planet Belfast*, these plays question the idea that Northern Ireland will be out of danger once normality arrives. Instead, they suggest that normality isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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