

## Crossing Trans Thresholds: A Roundtable

By Lauren Cassidy – June 23, 2023

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2023, Taylor Follett (a PhD student at University College Dublin, researching representations of women's relationship to the family in contemporary Irish novels) and Caleb O'Connor (a PhD student at University College Dublin, researching the influence of queer cultural production on ecological commitments to urban change) co-organised and chaired an interdisciplinary roundtable on "Crossing Trans Thresholds" at the Museum of Literature Ireland (MoLI), with the purpose of negotiating the relationship between trans theory and praxis in the Irish academy. The invited roundtable participants were El Reid-Buckley (a PhD researcher in sociology at the University of Limerick, who examines the spatialised sexual identity negotiations of bisexual+ individuals living in post-marriage-equality Ireland), Matt Kennedy (a University College Dublin doctoral candidate researching transnormativity in Irish policy and the everyday lifeworlds of young trans men in Ireland) and Robin Steve (a PhD student and poet at University College Dublin, who analyses the intersections between trans\* poetics, trans\* ecologies, and trans\* temporalities through both creative and critical praxis). A lively conversation ensued, exploring the relationship (or in some cases, the lack of a relationship) between the academy, art, activism, and transness, with both chairs and participants offering personal insight, radical critiques, and generative suggestions about the future of trans theory and praxis in Ireland.

The event began with a conversation about Kennedy's article ["Some Things are Worth Losing to Become. /?"](#) (*Irish University Review*, May 2020) as an ethnographic negotiation between theory and praxis. Kennedy pulls from his own life in this article, interrogating what it means to become a legible man as someone who has experienced a multiplicity of identities before realising and negotiating trans manhood. Kennedy maps this dialogue onto his body where he has "placed many tattoos, which both speak to and inform [his] understanding of [him]self as a trans man in Ireland" (39). During the roundtable, Kennedy described his article as something he needed to read at a particular moment in his life, and asserted the importance of lived experience as empirical evidence that needs to be respected; he argues that this is a useful strategy to bridge the gap between what theory says is happening in trans lives and what is actually happening in trans lives. In response, O'Connor referenced ecofeminism and his attempts to grapple with second-wave feminism and the implicit essentialism that still exists within its frameworks; he spoke about needing to deconstruct and problematise these theories, since many of them do not effectively reflect on contemporary issues and realities.

Reid-Buckley spoke about the ineffectiveness of universities as activist spaces. They emphasized that hospitality is not just about inviting people into a space, but about the redistribution of resources within that space so that it becomes possible for marginalised groups to remain and flourish. Reid-Buckley pointed out the paradox of taking on PhD students who work on trans topics without also taking on or providing these students with access to faculty members with expertise and experience in the area. They asserted that this is not true hospitality in the academy. Kennedy and Steve agreed about the precarity of the academy, especially for trans academics, who cannot cultivate meaningful mentorship relationships in the absence of established trans academics in Ireland, an infrastructural limitation that is leading to trans brain drain. Steve explained how they had to move to Ireland in order to undertake the work they are interested in because Italian academia does

not prioritise or even allow space for gender studies. It was pointed out that 'trans brain drain' in Ireland will have repercussions beyond the academy. Intersectional identities were then discussed, with the panellists problematizing tendencies to conceptualise the trans subject as white, middle-class, and able-bodied. Reid-Buckley discussed how they often feel doubly shut out of academia as a trans person from a working-class background. They later noted the repeated obligation and emotional labour required of trans people to lay their lives bare to achieve access support such as counselling support, fee waivers and more in academic life.

Follett spoke about the general precarity of academia, which is exacerbated for trans people alongside the added safety concerns that must be taken into consideration as well as the emotional/physical labour trans people must perform to ensure their bodies, pronouns and identities are respected in each town, university, faculty, conference, research community and event space they find themselves in. He noted that the academy often fails to interrogate the viability of conference locations, with organisations failing to complete their due diligence, which should include prior research on the treatment of LGBTQIA+ people in disparate cultural contexts. Moreover, he also highlighted how short-term contracts affect trans people in ways that are not usually considered, citing the time and energy invested by trans people to ensure their colleagues get pronouns right, before having to relocate and repeat this process anew at a new university – which may be located somewhere unsafe. O'Connor asked the group how to navigate being viewed as a symbol for the trans movement, or a bastion against criticism towards the trans movement. Reid-Buckley responded by stating it requires infinite emotional labour, because trans people must keep telling their story.

The roundtable ended with a discussion on the presence of trans people in Irish archives, with the [Small Trans Library Dublin](#), the [Trans Metadata Collective](#), and Limerick Alternative Pride (facilitated by Reid-Buckley) invoked as restorative organisations and events. The many questions offered by an engaged and lively audience following the roundtable was a testament to both the relevance of and necessity for Follett and O'Connor's event, a radical and defiant contribution to trans liberation in a particularly hostile historical moment for the trans community.