

TES SLOMINSKI, *TRAD NATION: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RACE IN IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2020). ISBN 9780819579287, 244pp, £19.95 (Hardback).

Tes Slominski's *Trad Nation: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Irish Traditional Music* is a thought-provoking work that calls for scholars and practitioners of Irish traditional music to reassess contemporary and historical understandings of the genre, and to acknowledge and address issues of inclusivity and equality within the traditional music scene in Ireland, and abroad. This book is broad in its remit; it is part historiography, grounded in archival research, and part ethnography, informed by fieldwork and interviews. However, it is foremost a political manifesto that calls for the immediate abandonment of the ideological 'shackles' of ethnic nationalism, which, Slominski maintains, has served as the primary framework for understanding the 'sounds and social practices' of Irish traditional music since the late nineteenth century. This work is shaped by an understanding of ethnic nationalism as experienced in the recent past in the author's home country, the United States of America, where it has been utilized as a tool of oppression and exclusion within social and political discourses, as well as in institutional practices. While Slominski acknowledges that the motivations that underpin ethnic nationalism in Irish and American contexts differ, she argues that they promote similar forms of oppression, most notably sexism, heterosexism, and discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity and race. Through *Trad Nation*, Slominski calls for scholars and practitioners to 'protect the genre from being co-opted by right-wing extremists outside Ireland and to provide a model for redefining "ethnic" musics based on qualities other than genetic heritage' (11). The methodology of *Trad Nation* is shaped by, and evolves from, the work's activist imperative to reveal the 'epistemic and ontological damage' (166) inherent within the paradigm of ethnic nationalism. Approaching this ideology from a variety of perspectives, including historical and contemporary, queer and feminist, Slominski demonstrates through a series of case studies how the 'instruments' or 'tools' of ethnic nationalism have been used to exclude or discriminate against women musicians, queer musicians, and musicians of colour. The tools used to support 'colonialist and imperialist logics of domination' are identified as 'reproductive sexuality, domestic femininity, and the inseparability of national identity and whiteness' (15). The effect of ethnic nationalism on Irish traditional music is explored in different eras and transnational contexts, with a particular focus on Ireland and the United States.

*Trad Nation* is highly critical of how 'the tradition' and those who uphold it have treated, and continue to engage with, 'non-normative' musicians (read as anyone who

does not fit the demographic of white, ethnically Irish, heterosexual, and male). Slominski identifies herself at the outset as a 'non-normative' musician and scholar of the genre. Her identity as a queer woman 'traddie' who is not ethnically Irish, but from the deep rural south of the United States, inspires her to consider the following facets of identity within a range of contexts from the early twentieth century to the present day: race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. On this journey, the themes of recognition, belonging, and silencing dominate in revealing how hegemonic power operates within the discourses of this musical world, and how ethnic nationalism influences perceptions of which musicians belong and which playing styles are judged 'authentic' and aesthetically pleasing.

This research is motivated by a desire to reframe Irish traditional music as a transnational and postnationalist genre, liberated from the discriminatory and exclusionary practices and beliefs inherent in its tradition. Slominski credits the #MeToo and the Black Lives Matter movements, in addition to the grassroots organisation FairPlé, with emboldening this activist scholarship. *Trad Nation* also reflects recent trends in the breakdown of boundaries between the disciplines of musicology and ethnomusicology. The diversity of theoretical and philosophical discourses, and cultural concepts that appear throughout this work, facilitate a research paradigm that allows Slominski to explore lines of enquiry that are often overlooked, avoided or deemed irrelevant within Irish traditional music studies. Moreover, these methodologies allow her to challenge prevailing norms in Irish traditional music culture, in its social practices, and in approaches to its scholarship.

Slominski's approach to writing about Irish traditional music exemplifies a form of embodied criticism informed by her personal relationship with the music and experiences of playing it. Each chapter of *Trad Nation* demonstrates a self-reflexive approach to scholarship that is revealed in the reflections provided on the choices of analytical tools being brought to the context under discussion: she consistently reveals the inner workings of her analytical logic, theoretical influences, personal experiences, and aspects of the research journey. *Trad Nation* is written in language that is consciously feminist and queer, and is careful to avoid the use of problematic binaries. For instance, 'they' is used where possible in place of s/he and notably, only the descriptor 'woman' is used. Slominski eschews ideologically loaded terms for women such as 'female', 'girl', and 'lady.'

While this work's grounding in cultural theory is its primary strength, it also presents an accessibility issue. Those without a background knowledge in cultural theory may find this book somewhat challenging due to the sheer diversity of methods and concepts the author draws upon (e.g. queer theory, feminist theory, actor-network theory, interpellation, essentialism, entextualization). This 'cabinet of methodologies'

is necessitated by the range and diversity of the research questions posed. In the introduction, Slominski states three primary research questions and additional corollary research questions appear in each chapter. The three core questions indicate the scope of this inquiry into the world of Irish traditional music: (1) What (and whom) do dominant systems of sex, gender, and ethnicity exclude? (2) How do societies rely on these systems and exclusions to reproduce national identity? (3) How might we celebrate cultural traditions currently understood as national while dismantling the racisms and (hetero)sexisms that fuel ethnic nationalism?

There is not adequate space in a single monograph to explore all the questions posed by Slominski in the depth they warrant. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the book's significant contribution to Irish traditional music studies, nor its importance as a rallying cry for radical change. Slominski's work invites scholars to join her in engaging consciously in activist work to transform the genre by rejecting an ideology that is discriminatory and damaging to a large number of musicians. She argues that ethnically Irish people have a 'special obligation' to rethink the genre's relationship with ethnic nationalism.

The book comprises two main sections. The first three chapters are historical in nature, and focus primarily on the experiences of women musicians in the twentieth century (c1900-1970), while the remaining two chapters focus on the contemporary scene. Through an investigation of how the tributary discourses of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity were used in support of an ethnic nationalist metanarrative, Slominski demonstrates that the stories that have shaped our understanding of 'the tradition' are essentialized and incomplete. *Trad Nation* begins to address the genre's identity problem by highlighting voices that are not always heard, and in relating stories that are 'harder to tell'.

A reliance upon 'the narrative and patriarchal tools of genealogy' (22) to document the history of Irish traditional music has privileged particular musical lineages, resulting in certain misconceptions about the genre and the contribution of women. In focusing upon the stories of women musicians in the first three chapters, Slominski reveals a range of social and cultural factors that played a hand in othering and excluding certain musicians from historical accounts, and that impacted upon women's ability to make music. These include the gendered segregation of music in education curricula; the gendering of musical instruments, such as the uilleann pipes, to the extent that it was impossible for some women to find a teacher; the exclusion of

women from various performance contexts and positions of power in institutions that support Irish traditional music.

Pierre Bourdieu has argued that it is ‘in the metaphors of poets’ that forms of domination can often be seen at work.<sup>1</sup> Gendered metaphors are commonly found in revolutionary nationalist contexts. For instance, India’s Bharat Mata (Mother India), and Marianne, the ‘goddess of revolution’ in France (29). In chapter one Slominski explores the affective power of metaphors such as Mother Ireland, Erin or Hibernia, and the Shan Van Vocht (*sean bhean bhocht*) in Irish nationalist discourses, and how they were used to promote ethnic nationalism. Framed within Sara Ahmed’s work on the cultural politics of emotion, Slominski posits that metaphors of Ireland as woman reveal symbolic understandings of gender which can translate into symbolic violence with tangible consequences, including the lack of recognition as a musician or the silencing of women musicians.

... musicians who fit the visual, behavioral, and demographic norms reinforced by personifications of Ireland as maiden or mother, the nationalist movement created unique opportunities for nationally recognized performance, but for women musicians who did not fit these norms, public or semi-public music making was difficult or impossible (44).

Personifications of Ireland as maiden or mother also impacted upon the reception of women musicians and their ability to be read as ‘tradition bearers’ within the genre. Slominski notes that only mothers of male musicians or maidens accompanied by a male chaperone (typically a father, brother or husband) were afforded opportunities to be recognized and in some cases remembered as public musicians. The flute player Mary Kilcar is highlighted as a case in point of how the status of spinster could render a musician unintelligible as a tradition bearer. The only account of her musical activity is related by the fiddler Lucy Farr, who tells us that Kilcar (c1890–[?]) never played outside her home in the village of Lishenny, Co. Galway. Within a tradition that values the lineage of tunes, Kilcar was ‘a transmissive dead end’, as she ‘does not fit into the category through which most women musicians of her generation are remembered: as mothers who passed tunes down to their sons’ (61). Slominski’s research reveals that the transmission of tunes from woman to woman ‘is rarely noted among Irish traditional musicians’, and that for single women ‘bodies out of heterosexual reproductive circulation also meant tunes out of circulation’ (61).

Women musicians in the early twentieth century were consistently marked by their gender, while the unmarked musician is gendered male. Citing examples from

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 54.

O'Neill's *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (1913),<sup>2</sup> Slominski notes that the entries on women musicians 'consider a woman's musicianship as peripheral to her identity' (58). Competent women musicians are frequently infantilized and patronized in descriptions such as 'clever little artiste' and 'little girl'.

In chapter 2 Slominski addresses the ideological schism, grounded in constructions of class and gender, that has historically divided Irish traditional music and art music in Ireland. She relates that 'the dominant historical narrative of Irish traditional music has largely ignored art music except as a contaminant whose techniques and methods of transmission threaten to dilute or destroy the "pure drop"' (67). In the early twentieth century this division complicated the reception of women fiddlers, who are often incorrectly assumed to be upper-class urban classical violinists and subsequently, deemed not to be traditional musicians. Through a case study of the fiddler Treasa Ní Ailpín, Slominski reveals how understandings of class and gender excluded certain groups of musicians from the tradition, and precluded certain ways of playing. For instance, the use of vibrato, so common and admired in art music, is construed as 'foreign and artificial' within the genre of Irish traditional music. The author draws upon the work of Harry White in contextualizing the relationship between art music and Irish traditional music in this period, but overlooks more recent scholarship in this area by musicologists such as Benjamin Dwyer, Barra Ó'Seaghda, and Gerry Smyth which would have enriched the discussion. Slominski then reflects upon 'the way power circulates' in approaches to biographies of marginalized figures. She explains that 'in writing the musical lives of members of a group marked by difference, one must guard against reducing biographical subjects to their social identities, because doing so denies individual subjectivity even as it bestows recognition' (100). Inspired by the work of feminist theorist Adriana Cavarero, Slominski presents a 'sympathetic' biography of the renowned fiddler Julia Clifford that leaves space for the 'who' and the 'what' Clifford represents. Arguing that histories of Clifford tend to either 'erase her gender or emphasize it' (100), Slominski notes that she is usually viewed as a woman musician (a 'what'), and little is known about who she was. She concludes that in the case of Clifford, the identity 'musician' appears to have prevailed over 'woman'. Clifford's career demonstrated that women could 'join the ranks of Irish traditional music's greats' (134), yet this example should not be used to service the argument that gender trouble does not exist within the genre.

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<sup>2</sup> Francis O'Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (Chicago: The Regan Printing House, 1913).

In the final two chapters Slominski draws parallels between the treatment of musicians of colour and queer musicians in the twenty-first century, and that of women musicians in the early twentieth century, as these types of bodies face similar obstacles in being recognised as authentic trad musicians. Some harsh truths are directed at the Irish trad scene, its deep-rooted issues of racism and sexism, and the selective implementation of Ireland's culture of *céad míle fáilte* ('a hundred thousand welcomes'). Slominski posits that an 'ideal of openness' is not always experienced by 'marginalized traddies', who are not adequately represented in 'scholarship, recordings, concert bookings, and forms of recognition such as TG4's Gradam Ceoil awards' (12). They are also more likely to encounter difficulties in accessing a 'flow' state while playing in sessions. However, the most damning analyses are directed more pointedly at the United States than Ireland.

*Trad Nation* can make for uncomfortable reading at times, particularly in places where Slominski relates examples of how symbolic violence translates into real-world verbal and physical harassment, and assault towards certain types of musicians. An interviewee's account of being sexually assaulted while playing during a session and none of the other players intervening or showing solidarity is a stark example of the oppressive and discriminatory nature of inaction and silence.

Slominski reports a reluctance within the traditional music scene to discuss issues of discrimination or exclusion and notes that statements such as 'nothing matters but the music' or 'shut up and play' are 'used to silence conversations about discrimination' (18). Ultimately, this attitude rejects difference and promotes assimilation. While many non-normative musicians may feel the desire to assimilate in order to avoid friction or forms of othering, she proposes that participants in the scene should instead recognize and respect difference.

Slominski identifies some significant obstacles to dismantling the framework of ethnic nationalism. These include the insularity of the genre, the conservatism of the institutions that promote it, and the economic incentives to sell 'authentic Irish' culture within the Irish music and tourism industries. In illustrating the conservatism of certain arbiters of traditional culture she cites the example of the Ardstiúrthóir (Director General) of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann publicly stating his opposition to the referendum to legalize same-sex marriage in 2015. This point, made in the endnotes, belongs in the main text, as it contributes to the wider debate about who belongs within the tradition.

Slominski's work indicates that an alternative, more inclusive reality for the scene is possible in a postnationalist and transnational understanding of Irish traditional music that does not just belong to those of an ethnically white Irish identity, nor to any essentialized concept of 'Irishness'. However, a multitude of approaches will be

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required to decode, confront and reconfigure the inherited normative narratives and practices that surround traditional Irish music, and this change will require a community response. While a postnationalist understanding of Irish traditional music is already developing, the question of belonging needs to be addressed, particularly for those who are discriminated against within the current paradigm. *Trad Nation* is a much needed and somewhat overdue intervention, that will provoke debate and support scholars and practitioners in confronting the inherited 'logics of domination' that continue to discriminate against and oppress non-normative musicians on the basis of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity.

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