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## #SaveBenjy: Sexuality, Queer Animals, and Ireland

We are informed that if repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge and sexuality since the classical age, it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost: nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required. (Foucault 5)

In November 2014, Benjy, a Charolais Bull in the Republic of Ireland, gained global fame for exhibiting behaviors antithetical to those commonly imagined of a bull. The bull only expressed sexual interest in weanling bulls and not in the heifers he was expected to impregnate. His sexual preferences sparked national and global action in the form of a Crowdfunder campaign to save the bull from inevitable slaughter, since his actions were incompatible with the procreative emphasis of the livestock industry.

#SaveBenjy, as the campaign was called, captures a marked shift in cultural attitudes towards homosexuality in Ireland. This essay considers the discourse of sexuality, both in the historical and Irish cultural context. Foucault's *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (1976) identified how sex was brought into biological discourses, where it could be studied and explained and, by the nineteenth century, how heterosexual reproductive sex was promoted as the norm. Same-sex non-reproductive behavior was made "deviant" with strict laws and prohibitions. In Ireland, the doctrine of the Catholic Church emphasized chastity and restraint, and sex was confined to the married heterosexual couple, while same-sex non-reproductive activity was a criminal offence.

However, the decriminalization of homosexual behavior has marked a gradual shift towards equality and tolerance in Ireland. The prominence and popularity of #SaveBenjy is anything but coincidental. In May 2015, the referendum on gay marriage sought to legalize same-sex marriage. Consequently, #SaveBenjy provides a timely lens through which to view Irish attitudes towards sexuality, while also raising important questions around nonhuman subjectivity and personhood.

Ireland is the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote. A mere 22 years after decriminalizing homosexual acts in the state, Ireland has received global attention and adulation for recognizing that same-sex couples should have the

right to marry, benefiting from all the same legal protections as heterosexual couples. The winning margin of 62% has been described as “a social revolution, an expression of decency and a country coming of age” (“As It Happened”). Ireland is in transition, moving away from Catholicism towards an increasingly secular society, and the support and attention that #SaveBenjy attracted further reinforces the change in cultural attitudes towards homosexuality.

The #SaveBenjy campaign has brought both human and other-animal homosexuality into the public sphere in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> The widespread support and global media coverage of this campaign, I contend, not only reflect a cultural context of sexual plurality but also a need for greater appreciation of the sexual multiplicity of non-human animals. In a world where heterosexual reproductive sexual activity is viewed as the norm, same-sex non-reproductive sexual activity is seldom associated with non-human animals, even though homosexual behavior has been detected in more than 450 animal species around the world (Bagemihl 12).<sup>2</sup> The #SaveBenjy phenomenon allows for a deconstruction of our preconceived ideas of identity and sexuality, using concepts in queer theory and postmodern naturecultures.<sup>3</sup> The repression of sex and sexuality in Irish history has meant that to reach any sense of freedom, we must remove laws, open a dialogue, and recognize the intrinsic and non-threatening value of sex and sexuality in our lives. This essay is an “irruption of speech” (Foucault 6) that hopes to elucidate the social implications associated with the imagining of a gay bull in contemporary Catholic Ireland.

I categorize Ireland as Catholic, when in reality the country has become markedly secularized in recent decades. In the past 50 years, the influence of the Catholic Church has waned. The 1995 referendum to legalize divorce passed, although only by just over 9,000 votes, with a clear urban/rural divide reflecting the stronger influence of the Catholic Church in rural areas. In addition, scandals have exposed hypocrisy in Catholic teachings and undermined the reputation of the Catholic Church in Ireland (Inglis).

In early November 2014, a Charolais bull in East Mayo was reported by various global media sources as gay, from *The Irish Independent* to *Fox News*, from *NBC News Australia* to *Russia Today*. The bull had been purchased for breeding, but after three months none of the heifers was in calf. Benjy was deemed healthy by an examining vet, so the farmer gave Benjy more time in the herd. Benjy, however, seemed only to mount the weanling bulls, showing no attention to the heifers. As Benjy was too old to be castrated, the farmer decided to fatten him up for slaughter to recoup some of his lost earnings. It was

at this point that a local journalist heard about the “gay bull” and the story started to cause a stir. The Animal Rights Action Network (ARAN) heard about Benjy and sought the support of *Gay UK* magazine. Together they launched a petition to raise £5,000 with Crowdfunder to buy Benjy from the farmer and transport him to Hillside Sanctuary in Norfolk, where he would be free to be himself and die of old age.

#SaveBenjy became especially newsworthy following the involvement of *The Simpsons*' co-creator and philanthropist Sam Simon, with #SaveBenjy being documented in news articles from Chile to Belgium. The Crowdfunder campaign managed to raise £9,400 through the petition, including the significant donation of £5,000 from Simon. This media attention was centered on the Benjy's perceived sexual preference. The involvement of *Gay UK* emphasizes the aspect of the story that appealed to so many people. Millions of animals are slaughtered annually for human consumption, but Benjy was to be slaughtered specifically because he did not fulfil his role as an inseminator. His sexuality meant that he was only viable as meat.

The discourses of queer theory and naturecultures illuminate the significance of both the campaign to save Benjy and the support it received. Michel Foucault's foundational *The History of Sexuality* (1976) looks critically at sex and sexuality in the Western context. My epigraph illustrates his view of the repression of sex as an expression of power by the bourgeois elite, what he calls biopower.<sup>4</sup> Foucault details how sexuality was “carefully confined” in the nineteenth century as the “conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule” (3). Thus, during the Victorian era, sex was considered legitimate only in a heterosexual marital relationship, and was not spoken of otherwise. Prior to the early nineteenth century, sex and sexuality were more openly discussed in “shameless discourse,” but in the Victorian era sex was denaturalized and became “utilitarian and fertile.”

This purification of sex manifested itself through Catholic doctrine in Ireland, and homosexual non-reproductive sexual behavior was now identified as deviant. Queer theorist Gayle Rubin describes mistreatment of homosexuals in the US during the 1950s, from frequent police raids to queer bashing. The US gay rights movement in the 1970s led to a rethinking of what it meant to be gay or lesbian, and brought about a radical new era when sexual preferences could no longer be viewed as legitimate grounds for discrimination. Ireland's movement towards becoming a more tolerant country would take another 20 years.

In *Lessons in Irish Sexuality* (1998) sociologist Tom Inglis examines the role of sex education in the formation of attitudes towards sex in Ireland. Most sex education literature produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was published by the Catholic Church, and espoused modesty, chastity, and restraint (29). Sex and desire were heavily regulated in dating, dances, and all contact between the sexes (30). Children were kept in the dark about matters of sex, subjects deemed appropriate only for adults. According to “How to Talk to your Child About Sex,” the Catholic Church depicted homosexuals as being incapable of relating to each other except via genital contact: “These are a minority group and many of them regret that they seem unable to enjoy marriage and family life” (qtd. in Inglis 160). Homosexual behavior was regarded as a criminal offence in Ireland until 1993, and homosexual people were equated with child molesters and prostitutes. In the 22 years since its decriminalization, attitudes towards homosexuality have improved: for example, the civil partnership of same-sex couples became legal in 2010 in Ireland. The #SaveBenjy campaign began just before the Irish Republic voted in a referendum to change the constitution to legalize gay marriage in May 2015.

While the laws criminalizing homosexuality have been removed, the inculcated attitudes towards homosexual behavior will not be reversed so easily. In *Thinking Sex*, Rubin is eager to adopt a radical new discourse of sex and sexuality. Both Foucault and she argue against sexual biological essentialism. Queer theorists see sexual identity as changeable and socially and culturally mediated rather than biologically predetermined. As Rubin puts it:

The belly’s hunger gives no clue as to the complexities of cuisine. The body, the brain, the genitalia and the capacity for language are necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences and its institutional forms. Moreover, we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures give to it. (149)

In “Queernaturecultures,” David Bell identifies how the “problematic fixity” (139) of sexual essentialism means that queer theory can in fact be “at odds with the agenda of activists” (140). If sexuality is not an *identity* but an *activity*, as Rubin claims, then sexual identity is unstable, whereas Benjy was persistently referred to as “Benjy the Gay Bull” in the media, reinforcing the belief that sexuality is a defining characteristic.<sup>5</sup> Queer theory suggests that sexual ability may be determined biologically, but the manifestations of sexuality and the emergent desires of an individual are culturally mediated.

Queer theory's rejection of sexual essentialism challenges the role of nature, which had long been used to normalize heterosexual activity and to discount homosexual activity. Jovian Parry discusses how reproductive heterosexual activity is used to reinforce claims of "naturalness" (9), while same-sex activity is demonized as "animalistic" (9). The #SaveBenjy campaign saw the seemingly innocuous behaviors of a bull become imbued with meaning and significance indicative of the Irish cultural context. The manifestations of Benjy's body moved beyond the individual to the cultural, framed by the desire to normalize homosexuality in an increasingly secularized country.

The utility of nature as a heteronormatizing force was influenced by two factors. The first was industrialization, which moved people away from nature and interactions with other animals. The second factor was that aspect of Darwin's theory that emphasized animals' drive to reproduce and continue the species. This emphasis on heterosexual reproductive activity created a picture of the non-human animal as only engaging in sexual activity with the opposite sex, and inevitably has led to under-recording or -documenting of same-sex behavior in non-human animals.

Bruce Bagemihl argues that any evidence of non-reproductive same-sex activity has been rationalized, in effect "explaining away" (122) any same-sex behaviors. Published in 1999, Bagemihl's *Biological Exuberance* offers both a "wondrous bestiary" (265) chronicling the myriad of same-sex activities exhibited by a wide range of species, and an exploration of how non-reproductive homosexual activity in non-human animals is treated in scientific discourse. The #SaveBenjy campaign was treated as an oddity, but Bagemihl demonstrates that homosexuality in animals is not a new phenomenon. He finds that homosexual activity exhibited by non-human animals, unless it is explicit sexual intercourse, is either omitted from research findings or insufficiently documented, being wrongly categorized under a number of other behaviors such as affiliation or dominance (107).

Bagemihl identifies hundreds of species, from Bonobos to Canada Geese, from Bottlenose Dolphins to Rhesus Macaques, among whom homosexual behavior is prevalent. He also details the multiplicity of sexual behaviors found in same-sex pairings, from child-rearing arrangements to transsexualism and transvestism. He even distinguishes among types of homosexual behavior: for example, there is a relatively high prevalence of lesbianism in Bonobos. While cattle are not documented in the bestiary, Bagemihl does mention that homosexual activity has been evidenced in cattle (81). His bestiary systematically details the various forms of homosexual activity in

species and identifies courting behaviors, such as “strutting” amongst female Sage Grouse in a same-sex courtship (13). The expansive evidence of homosexuality in nature suggests that, if homosexual behavior is so widely prevalent in a variety of species, it is not “unnatural” for humans, that “naturalness is more a matter of interpretation than facts” (79).

Bagemihl details how many ethologists and other researchers disregarded any same-sex behavior that is not overt sex, calling it imitation of heterosexuality (pseudoheterosexuality), substitute activity in the absence of the opposite sex, a mistake, or a pathological condition, seeking to explain the behavior rather than understand it. Bagemihl claims that the preconceived notions of heteronormative sexual activity in non-human animals are grounded in the traditional “Noah’s Ark view” of the animal kingdom, where “biology revolves around two sexes, male and female, with one of each to a pair” (36). Ecologist Joan Roughgarden equates the homophobia in science with a “cover up” (128).

The explaining away of animal homosexuality is not true of all researchers. Paul Vasey and Anne Innis Dagg are identified by Bagemihl as significant exceptions. Bagemihl strives for an appreciation of the multiplicities of sex, sexualities, and genders amongst non-human animals in what he terms a biological exuberance (see also Giffney and Hird).

Biological exuberance is, above all, an affirmation of life’s vitality and infinite possibilities; a worldview that is at once primordial and futuristic, in which gender is kaleidoscopic, sexualities are multiple, and the categories of male and female are fluid and transmutable. A world, in short, exactly like the one we inhabit. (Bagemihl 262)

Therefore, queer animals present us with an opportunity to revise our conception of the natural world as heterosexual and reproductive. #SaveBenjy provided an arena within which our cultural perceptions of sex and sexuality could be interrogated, while also opening a dialogue into homosexuality as part of a greater spectrum of sexuality.

Although #SaveBenjy attracted much support, the legitimacy of the gay bull was called into question by a national agricultural publication, which claimed that ARAN was using Benjy merely as a “mascot” (Kingston) for its own agenda. Journalist and dairy farmer Harold Kingston in the *Irish Farmer’s Journal* illustrates the most despicable aspect of the story from his point of view: “What is not normal is the attempt to make



this a gay rights issue. It is just another way to humanise Benjy.” Here Kingston suggests that homosexuality is exclusive to humans. He identifies the comparison of animals to humans as the contentious issue in this case, where a bull needs to be rescued as if it is enslaved in the agricultural process, which he suggests “trivializes” the work of human rights groups.

In reality, the contentious issue is rather that the sexual preferences of a bull are incompatible with and inconceivable within the livestock industry, and the only option available for a gay bull is to be slaughtered. In the nature-culture dualism paradigm, the animal is natural, devoid of culture, and the cultural connotations denoted by gay rights are an attempt to “humanise Benjy” (Kingston). Furthermore, it is apparent that even the social connotations arising from the term “gay” are exclusively human, which communicates an anthropocentric view of non-human animal subjectivity and sexuality. Kingston’s article reflects a pervasive attitude towards livestock as unthinking and sexually driven, rather than sentient and sexually selective.

An unavoidable aspect of #SaveBenjy is the rural landscape within which it originated. Ireland’s agricultural industry is male-dominated, with a recent study illustrating how women own a mere 12% of farms in Ireland (Healy). This male-dominated landscape contrasts strongly with the rest of Europe, where one in four farms are owned by women (Healy). While it is difficult to speculate on the pressures faced by farmers in terms of the heteronormatizing nature of rural communities, Rubin theorizes that “dissident sexuality is rarer and more closely monitored in small towns and rural areas” (161).

The coverage of #SaveBenjy opens a dialogue on homosexual activity in a landscape that survives and thrives on heterosexual reproductive non-human animal activity in a male-dominated landscape.



As the #SaveBenjy story reached its “happy ending” with Benjy being transported to Hillside Sanctuary in Norfolk, the media reports decreased and Benjy fell into anonymity once again. However, by this stage, it appeared as if Benjy the actual living animal had become marginalized by the coverage. Instead, he became elevated to a symbolic status; a Google search of “Benjy the Gay Bull” categorizes countless images of Benjy superimposed onto a rainbow-colored background.<sup>6</sup>

Benjy’s behavior challenged cultural perceptions of non-human animals as intrinsically heterosexual. His homosexual activity eluded normative sexual categories of ordering which are defined, discrete, and biologically determined. More importantly, Benjy was no longer a Charolais bull who engaged in homosexual activity; he became a symbol, a representative for the naturalness of homosexuality.

The marginalizing of the bull to symbolic status denied Benjy his agency; an agency that communicates sexual selection at odds with both the demands of the livestock industry and our preconceived notions of non-human animal sexuality. He is seen as a device to realize meaning and understanding for the human as he fragments normative perceptions of the natural world as rigorously heterosexual. In order to re-establish Benjy’s agency, which challenges the limited boundaries of sexual categorization in human groups, it is imperative to find “ways of allowing matter to matter” (Alaimo 55).



Benjy's popularity in the media was motivated by a desire to "condone human homosexuality" (Parry 9) in the run-up to the gay marriage referendum. Stacy Alaimo details how the use of queer animals as a device against political hegemony and heteronormative bias would lead to these animals being used as proof of the animality of nature. She documents how the nature-culture dualism diminishes the agency of animals while also reducing them to a political device, so that their activities could be construed as "bestial perversions" (Alaimo 55). Finally, it further reinforces a tradition of categorization and identification, whereby subjects are defined by what they do. The #SaveBenjy case demonstrated all three reasons against using homosexuality in animals as proof that it is natural. Benjy became a mascot (Kingston), a victim (O'Neill), and a tool to further the political agenda of both animal and gay rights ("Save Benjy"). While Benjy's agency was denied, the campaign inadvertently assigned Benjy personhood, with Benjy being referred to as "he" rather than "it" in the media coverage. Benjy's personhood challenges the species-level perception of cattle that distances humans from the non-human animals used in the food industry.

In order to understand queer animals, Alaimo employs Haraway's "naturecultures" as the environment within which fluidity and plurality of sexuality can be achieved. She shows how non-human animals are cultural beings entwined in social interactions. Alaimo adopts a perspective similar to Bagemihl's, as she longs for a reconfiguration of the distinctions between nature and culture:

To look at queer animals not as a moral model or embodiment of some static universal law, but in order to find, in this astoundingly biological exuberance, a sense of vast diversity [...] and a proliferation of astonishing differences that make nonsense of biological reductionism. (Alaimo 55)

Like Bagemihl, Alaimo embraces the multiplicity of sexuality in the non-human animal world and explains that such multiplicity cannot be categorized by the conception of gender as male or female typical of a nature/culture dualism paradigm. #SaveBenjy emphasizes how the theoretical foundations of the nature/culture paradigm are impracticable in the deconstruction of such events. The reporting of the #SaveBenjy phenomenon is testament to the limits in our understanding of non-human animal homosexuality, since the story was regularly categorized under topics such as "Weird News" (Gee). As Alaimo says, "queer animals elude perfect modes of capture" (67).

Alaimo argues that the discourses of science are unable to make sense of the queer animal due to its multiplicity. She contends that nature/culture dualism restricts our

comprehension of sexuality as plural, plastic, and plentiful amongst non-human animals. For Alaimo “queer desire” is a cultural entity in natural worlds, and because it is both natural and cultural, it can only be understood in a naturecultures context. This shift in focus from sexual activity to desire engenders a new perspective on sexuality that cannot be consigned to the natural. Queer desire is a “reinstating of pleasure” (Foucault 5) within post-modern naturecultures.

The #SaveBenjy campaign was ultimately a “good news story,” as Benjy was saved from slaughter and allowed to live a long life in a sanctuary. It sheds light on how contemporary Ireland perceives sexuality, a sexuality that has been heavily regulated. While the work of Bagemihl has furthered our insight into animal homosexuality as part of a greater repertoire of sexual behaviors, the heteronormative view of the animal kingdom remains “unrelentingly straight” (Alaimo 56). An unavoidable factor in the #SaveBenjy phenomenon is the cultural context within which it arose, communicating an emergent trend where homosexuality is viewed as an acceptable form of sexuality. Ireland has, in just over two decades, shifted from decriminalizing homosexuality to rallying for the rights of a gay bull to legalizing gay marriage. Conversely, the marginalization of animal to symbolic status illustrates how Benjy’s agency, which challenged cultural categorizations of sexuality, was denied while his personhood was recognized throughout the coverage.

In the aftermath of the referendum, Benjy, since castrated, has hit the headlines once again amidst claims that he is “not so gay after all” (“Benjy the Bull Not So Gay After All”) as he was showing an interest in a heifer by the name of Jezebel. Of course, the primary concern should not be whether Benjy is gay, straight, or indeed, bisexual, as has been claimed (Cruz). Explicitly, #SaveBenjy, the story of a *potentially* homosexual Charolais bull, reflected the transformation already underway in Ireland as the historic gay referendum loomed. Implicitly and most importantly, #SaveBenjy embodies the *possibility* of recognizing sexual plasticity that is not exclusive to humans but could in fact be shared by all animals human and non-human alike.

## Notes

1. With the prevalence of social media, a Twitter hashtag was quickly created when the story about Benjy gained media coverage. This hashtag illustrates both the power of social media and the modes of communication in the digital age. #SaveBenjy was used not only on Twitter but in other reports.

2. Judith Butler explores the hegemony of heterosexuality in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of Sex*.
3. Haraway uses “naturecultures” to illustrate the interwoven connectedness that exists between nature and culture; they are co-evolved, interdependent and inter-relational.
4. Foucault’s term biopower explains how those in power seek to control the populations by a process of risk regulation; in contrast to sovereign power, biopower denotes firstly a disciplinary power that focuses on control of the body and secondly, a bio-politics which aims to regulate populations.
5. Butler is resistant to the fixity of identity and contends that sex is a regulatory practice that produces the body it governs. Sex materializes sexual difference, contributing to “the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (*Bodies That Matter* 12).
6. The rainbow is commonly associated with Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transsexual agenda as it symbolizes diversity.

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