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Editor's Notebook: The Personal is Political

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EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

This is the first occasion in the history of the magazine that Bridgewater Review has an all-female editorial staff.

The Personal is Political

In April of 2015 I chaired a roundtable at the American Conference for Irish Studies on Irish poet Eavan Boland and her powerful collection, *Domestic Violence*. To many, Boland is rivaled only by Seamus Heaney in her nuanced ability to navigate the Irish experience from a personal perspective that gently and brilliantly overlaps with the Irish national gaze. And in the poetic tradition of Heaney, she is often quoted as claiming that her poetry is neither political nor feminist. Yet, in the wake of the repeal of the Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution, a referendum that will end the constitutional ban on abortion in Ireland, and the tremendous vigor of #wakingthefeminists, an Irish movement similar to #metoo, it has become impossible to ignore the feminist voice, conscious or unconscious, that informs so much of Irish women's poetry, particularly works like Boland's *Domestic Violence*.

I was surprised by two moments during that 2015 roundtable and often find them resurfacing when I teach Boland, especially when I consider the question of whether any kind of Irish art or literature can shirk politics. During the opening remarks, our roundtable discussed the title of the collection, asking whether the reference to domestic violence could be separated from its legislative and physical connotations. One of my male colleagues argued that we must separate it; that the title is more than a personal reference but a national imperative and a way for the poet to transcend gender politics by speaking to national history. I was blindsided by this argument because,

for me, domestic violence is not only a marring political act but also always one that lays claim, usually to the detriment of the victim, to any personal experience thereafter. In effect, I cannot see domestic violence, whenever referenced, as anything less than personally political.

Toward the end of what turned out to be a fiery debate about the politics of poetry, after I argued ferociously time and again that *Domestic Violence* is a political and, more importantly, feminist book, a female colleague yelled to me from the back of the room, in a resentful tone, "What is your definition of feminism, then?" I would say that you have maybe five seconds in that moment, standing in front of a

room full of colleagues, put on the spot to define something that you usually assume speaks for itself, before chaos erupts. It only took me one second to say, "My definition of feminism is the personal is political."

It has occurred to me many times over the past two years, since Gloria Steinem disappointed so many young voters by urging us to vote for Hillary Clinton and, simultaneously, reminded so many middle-aged voters why feminism is an essential part of the work we do every day, that students at Bridgewater State University tend to live lives that deliberately make the political personal on a regular basis. Sometimes choosing to go to college is a political act for our students. Sometimes choosing to miss class or settle for a "C" is a personal choice made to maintain the political act of staying enrolled, of slouching toward the Bethlehem of graduation.

Feminism will always be personal and political to me and it will continue to be the lens through which I best understand our students. If nothing else, it has given me this perspective because it is a term defined by the pressure it puts on a binary. That pressure has increased exponentially as women enter more into the political arena in preparation for the next election cycle. Political struggle has become openly personal and the power behind that transition carries historical momentum and hopefulness, tools that can tear down even the most rigid of binary oppositions.



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"You Women are All Alike." The Hard Times Press, Feb. 2, 1972 [BSC student newspaper], Archives & Special Collections, Bridgewater State University.

The women's (or feminist) movement in the United States has seen numerous iterations, from early efforts to extend basic rights to (white) women, expanding and changing with time to emphasize suffrage, labor and representation rights, contraception and abortion rights, and, more recently, a focus on greater inclusion, the ubiquity of sexual violence and coercion, and a renewed focus to get women in positions of political power.

Currently, we are witnessing unprecedented numbers of women running for political office. The Center for American Women and Politics found that 53 women (31 Democrats and 22 Republicans) filed for Senate candidacy and 22 won their primaries. Four hundred seventy-six women (356 Democrats, 120 Republicans) filed to run for the House of Representatives and 234 have won their primaries. State and local races have seen similarly unparalleled numbers of women running for office. While more Democratic than

Republican women are running in all races, there is a bipartisan rise in women's candidacy for political office.

It is impossible to draw unyielding conclusions about why, but the current uptick in women's political participation cannot be argued. What may be most exciting about women's political moves is that we are seeing newcomers unseat long-standing incumbents, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York City and Ayanna Pressley in Boston. And many of the women now running for office are women of color, including Rashida Tlaib in Michigan

and Gina Ortiz-Jones in Texas, who are vocal about representing all people, but who will provide a breadth of personal experience that differs significantly from some of the representatives they hope to replace. Importantly, LGBTQ candidates are also running in record numbers: Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and Sharice Davids of Kansas, for example.

By the time this issue is in print, we will know if primary winners have emerged winners in the general election but regardless, women's success in the primaries indicates there is openness for new ideas and diverse perspectives which I hope will continue. For most feminists, the personal has long been political: many of the women on the ballots this year, whether they consider themselves feminist or not, are taking their personal public. And while "identity politics" is often publicly denigrated, openness about one's personal narrative and the ways our personal histories intersect with social and economic realities may allow others to find commonality. Thus the personal can help us, but especially our students, connect with each other, with new ideas, and with a sense of their own potential, personal revelations that can have long-lasting effects.



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