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Ollscoil na hÉireann, Corcaigh

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# **Reimagining Keening: An Examination of the Reinvention of Irish Lament as a Healing Tool in the Contemporary World**

Thesis presented by

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for the degree of

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University College Cork

Study of Religions

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2024

## Declaration

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism and intellectual property.

A handwritten signature in blue ink on a light yellow background. The signature reads "Marian Caulfield" in a cursive script.

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Marian Caulfield

27 December 2024

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## Abstract

This study explores the contemporary revival of the once widely practiced Irish funerary lament tradition known as *keening* (from the Irish *caoineadh*, meaning "to cry"). Keening has declined as a funerary practice since the early twentieth century but is now being reimagined in contemporary Ireland as a healing practice in workshops and retreats. Through ethnographic fieldwork (2017–2019), this study examines how groups in Ireland, (and to a lesser extent involves groups in Finland), are repurposing lament as a tool for emotional and spiritual wellbeing. This new way of doing ‘keening’ has found how, through a reinvention of this old tradition, a synthesis of the sonic and the spiritual generates the development of ‘sonic wellbeing tools’ for workshop participants. At its core, this thesis is an analysis of the identity and cultural dynamics at work in the revival of lament practices, and it examines the mechanisms involved when people reconnect with historical ritual and cultural practices. In the analysis of the myriad of connecting themes found in the ethnographic data, this study also elucidates the importance of ritual as a means of meaning making in the contemporary world (Bell 1997; Bowie 2006a, Collins 2014; Geertz, 1957; Grimes 2000; Turner, 1995). The theoretical framework for this thesis draws on a combination of sound studies, which emphasizes the overlooked role of raw vocal expressions like wailing, crying and moaning found in lament practice as well as ritual studies, orality/literacy, post-materiality, collective identity and memory studies. The significance of sound studies is elucidated in this thesis drawing on notable specialists in the field (Becker 2004; Stephen Feld 1984; Gershon 2013; Hackett 2011; Schulze 2012; Sterne 2012 and Voegelin 2014). The study also examines the spiritual ‘cosmology’ that could be identified in the discourse of the research groups and networks, firmly situating this study within the field of contemporary study of religions. This study demonstrates, however, that in such sound making, important spiritual meanings are found, and it offers a distinctive perspective on this cultural phenomenon. This study is

unique in its exploration of lament as a healing tool and is also innovative in its focus on contemporary lament practice through the lens of sound studies within the field of study of religions. As such, the study builds on the existing literature and knowledge about lament, while adding valuable insights into the mechanisms of contemporary spirituality and ritual, healing practices, and cultural life.

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I am deeply indebted to my family and friends for their patience, unwavering support and encouragement in so many ways, especially my daughter Katelyn and my partner Anthony.

Thank you to my brave research collaborators and fellow lamenters both in Ireland and Finland. In this regard, special thanks must go to Pirkko Fihlman, Tuomas Rounakari and Tanya Bryan without whom the whole PhD project may never have come to fruition.

Thank you all.

## Glossary of Terms

**Lament:** A term which is used to describe orally transmitted ritual custom performed at times of loss and grief such as emigration, evictions, weddings and funerals.

**Caoine:** The Irish language word for ‘cry’ and the origin of the English word ‘keen’.

**Caoineadh:** The Irish language word for ‘crying’. It was used to describes the action of ‘lamenting’ in the Irish tradition.

**Keen/Keening:** These are anglicized versions of the Irish Language terms described above for example: ‘the woman was *keening* at the funeral’ or ‘the woman was asked to *keen* for the researchers’

**Keener/ Keening woman or women:** Anglicized version of the Irish language terms above to describe lamenting woman or women, in the Irish tradition. For example: ‘They sent the message out for the keening woman to come’

**Wake:** A wake is a traditional ceremony held in Ireland after someone dies.

## Introduction

With sombre faces the gathering crowd slowly makes its way towards the brow of Sleaveen Hill just above the town of Macroom, there to occupy a high vantage point over the expansive valley of the River Lee directly to the South. From early morning we began to arrive as no one wants to miss the spectacle that is about to unfold. Entire families come composed of aged grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren, uncles and aunts, as well as longtime neighbors and friends. Curious at first maybe, but our silence betrays the deeper feelings of a sad and broken people, dispossessed of everything we have ever known and cherished.

A wave of anxiety sweeps through the motley throng, necks straining to catch a glimpse of the approaching calamity that will finally copper-fasten their demise. Initially it begins so gradually and so insidiously that it seems almost unreal. Maybe it's some horrible dream. Yet slowly but surely as the River Lee begins to back up and reverse its flow as sinister sliver of silvery water steadily expands and spreads out over the broad and flat floodplain delta that occupied the valley floor [...]. The passing is too much to bear: a sudden outpouring of suppressed grief echoes out across the valley and the surrounding countryside. The first to crack are the old, those with longer memories, the bitter tears of loss spilling down their wizened cheeks. Eventually every man, woman and child present sobs and weeps unashamedly as they watch their birthplace disappear beneath the rising waters. The broken sobbing wails of my grandmother cut deeply, penetrating into my very core, then just an infant cocooned in her arms.

Because this is our wake for the loss of our beloved homeland, the Gearagh river forest, the ritualistic keen or *caoineadh* usually reserved for a deceased person. Resonating from the lofty summit of the hill, the unrestrained wailing can be heard far off as it travels across the eerie silence but now enshrouds the dying valley, causing distant neighbors to stop in their tracks. All day long we keep up the crying chant with neither water to drink nor food to eat. None could. Everyone is too distressed and by the late afternoon the reason is all too apparent. What had recently been a vibrant green forest, by day's end it is an expansive water storage reservoir. The firesides around which generations had socialized, the gardens that had so long fed us and the forest that for centuries had provided sanctuary and substance during times of suppression and great want are now completely obliterated [...] As a forest people we are no more.

(Corcoran, 2021, pp. 14-16)

The preceding passage is taken from a book, *Saving Eden: The Gearagh and Irish Nature* by Kevin Corcoran, which describes the day of 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1956, when the last alluvial rainforest that existed in Europe was flooded for the opening of the new dam gates located downriver from what had been for thousands of years the Gearagh River Forest, near Macroom in County Cork, Ireland. Kevin Corcoran, one of the last generations of children to have been born into the forest, tells the 'horror story' of how this, his ancestral home, was decimated by the dam which had displaced its people, destroying their mostly self-sufficient livelihoods and destroying the animal, plant and river life that had existed there for thousands

of years. The introduction to the book describes the stories that the author was told by his grandmother about day that the ‘forest people’<sup>1</sup> (with him as a babe in his grandmother’s arms), stood on a hill opposite the river valley and watched their homes disappear under the water forever. Corcoran describes how his grandmother often told him the story of that day and of how a ‘keen’ rose from the people who had lived there for generations, and how they cried and wailed the whole day long without food or water, for the sadness of the event.

The reason that I begin with this passage is to demonstrate that even when keening, which seems to have all but died out around the rest of Ireland by this time,<sup>2</sup> the river people of the Gearagh, who had been somewhat cut off from the advancing modernisation of the surrounding regions in Cork, were still connected to the tradition and it was still an instinctive communal reaction to a traumatic event. The keen that arose that day was a spontaneous reaction of a traumatised community to their loss and grief and sadness, and it was ‘unashamedly’ cried and wailed on the side of the hill. Despite its demise in mainstream life at that time, by this account it is evident that the keening tradition was still part of an intuitive repertoire of at least one Irish community that had retained rituals and traditions which had disappeared from most of the rest of Ireland. Yes, the keen and its situation had changed, but it was still keening, and that day an impulse arose instinctively among the community to ‘wake’ the passing of their ancient forest homeland.

Based on my field experiences and accounts told to me anecdotally, it seems that today very few people in Ireland have heard of this tradition and fewer again seem to hold the ‘gift’ and skill of it and keening is no longer performed in its ritual setting of the wake (traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s own description.

<sup>2</sup> There could have been other situations like this where keening was still done or was a ‘living tradition’, but where these were not recorded in writing for posterity.

funeral), that we are aware of. However, while instances of keening may not have been reported much since the mid twentieth century in Ireland, Michelle Collins (2018) found that in some parts of the country there were still women who were said to be ‘keening’ on certain occasions but in a much-changed context.

The advent of this project has brought attention again to the Irish keening tradition by ‘re-imagining’ the possibility of its re-emergence and by considering the implications of that in a contemporary context. This study examines the motivations of contemporary people who are interested in learning how to keen, understanding their engagement as a ‘re-learning’ of the skill of lament composition and practice. To create a space in which people can learn to keen, a ‘workshop’ model is used, which is inspired by a Finnish lament revival group who have been using this workshop model for the past twenty-five years. The workshop setting of today is of course a very different setting to how it was experienced in the past and these workshops in Ireland have introduced a contemporary form of the Irish tradition, to allow people to learn what it is like to cry and wail one’s sorrows out loud and ‘unashamedly’, as the Gearagh River people did on the side of Sleaveen Hill in 1956. In this thesis I will relate the story of how this research project developed and what interesting findings have emerged from my work on this topic.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this project is to explore contemporary efforts to re-imagine and re-purpose a once important ritual lament custom in Irish society (but which today is no longer practiced) called ‘*caoine*’, but more commonly referred to today by non-native Irish speakers as ‘keening’. This project was inspired by the aforementioned lament revivalist group based in Finland, the group called ‘*Äänellä Itkijät*’, in literal translation ‘Loud Criers’, have

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<sup>3</sup> My period of field research on the contemporary lament groups in both Finland and Ireland was from 2017 until 2019.

successfully repurposed the Karelian lament there, where it has functioned as a modern ‘healing’ tool for over twenty years. As part of this revival effort, lament in Finland is taught in classes or workshops. This project, in essence, involves a re-imagining of Irish keening, using the Finnish ‘workshop’ model. It is important to state here that this thesis is not so much about historical keening (although this is discussed in Chapter 6) but about the interest in keening in modern contexts and about the potential for its revival or repurposing as a wellbeing tool in a similar fashion to the Finnish example.

The reimagining of the keening ritual tradition has involved taking inspiration from what we understand of its possible past functions i.e., to pay tribute to the deceased, to restore communities after the loss of its members, and as a temporary place of toleration for the critical voices of women who, outside of their role as a keening woman, may have had little opportunity to express themselves publicly as few women at this time had a strong public voice. One of the past functions of keening is also said to have been a spiritual one, and this is explored also. In this reimagining project, my aim was to see what would happen if a stimulated ‘reboot’ of this old ritual occurred in the Irish context. Inspired by what the Finns were doing, the aim was also to explore what are considered the ‘functional’ elements of keening within what we term today as ‘healing’ and ‘wellbeing’ spaces and in what Heelas and Woodhead (2005) term the ‘holistic milieu’.

## Research Questions

The central research questions guiding this thesis are:

1. Can an experimental reimagining of keening in Ireland serve as a healing practice, in a similar way to the Finnish example?
2. What would happen if the Finnish model of the Karelian lament workshops were adapted to the Irish context? What could this tell us about the Irish cultural context?

3. What might workshop participants' experiences of the embodied aspects of sound and vibration be in the process of reimagining keening, and what role could this play in their interpretations of keening and in their responses to it?

Although there is an ever-increasing trend in contemporary secular society to mark significant life transitions with non-religious rituals, there is a tendency in what Grimes (2000) calls our 'ritually deprived' landscape to borrow parts of ritual practices from other cultures, often causing offence to the cultural groups being borrowed from because of issues around cultural appropriation (Bell 1997; Grimes 2000). The Irish reimagining of keening in some ways relates to this. Even though it involves the reimagining of Ireland's 'own' cultural traditions, there are some scholars and segments of Irish society that may deem this highly offensive or disrespectful of the old tradition. Scholars have suggested that a reason people like to have ritual in their lives, and why people go in search of ritual and engage in reinvented ritual endeavours, is because there is a fundamental compulsion behind what Bell (1997) argues is an 'authoritative force' at play in ritual, which extends beyond the usual social and institutional hierarchies and which 'lie beyond the immediate control or inventiveness of those involved' (Bell, 1997, p. 169). We might say that this 'force', in Bell's sense, in the case of lament, is located in communal vibrational vocal expression such as crying, wailing, moaning, and other vocal sounds, whether in keening's originally practiced form or in a reimagined contemporary form. Bell's theory is discussed further in Chapter 4.

This 'authoritative force' is akin to an ineffable force that is described in many ways by a multitude of different scholars from different disciplines, for instance: 'altered state', 'ecstatic experience', 'spiritual experience', 'attunement'.<sup>4</sup> What is common amongst all

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<sup>4</sup> I have also explored these types of experiences (see Caulfield 2014) and defined them as 'ineffable experiences'.

these terms is that they generally relate to what Sharon Rey Alexander (2021, p. 10) describes as ‘a feeling of being one with another’ or a ‘sensory experience of connectedness with a greater whole’. Such ‘authoritative force’-related experiences are what I set out to explore using ethnographic methods.

## Inspiration

This project started in January 2017 when I travelled to Finland to meet with members of the lament revivalist group ‘*Äänellä Itkijät*’ who for over two decades have been running lament ‘classes’, also called ‘workshops’ (the latter term being used for the most part in this thesis), teaching groups of people about Karelian lament and showing them how to compose their own laments. The idea for doing a possible PhD on this topic came about after I had given a paper about the loss of keening at a conference in 2016.<sup>5</sup> I wrote in my diary notes at the time:

Prompted by a re-visiting my ‘Death of Irish Lament’ paper for ISASR 2016 conference. I remembered there was a revival effort in Helsinki and checked out the workshop and made enquiries with the organiser Pirkko Fihlman about the cost of the workshops. She responded by offering a FOC workshop at her home where she will invite English speaking lamenters. Also Jim Wilce happened to be visiting, so I will get a chance to meet him.

## Researching Keening

In the few years prior to that trip, in my undergraduate and MA studies, I came across mentions of this old tradition in Ireland and was amazed that I had never heard of it before, despite having been born and raised in Ireland. My undergraduate degree was a BA (hons) in Music, with the Study of Religions as my additional subject and at that very early point of

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<sup>5</sup> ISASR Fifth Annual Conference – Religion and Revolution. University College Cork. 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> June 2016. Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> Jun

my curiosity into the tradition of keening, I was initially just interested to try and find out how it might have sounded in the past. In my attempt to find out more about keening, I encountered numerous sources of information about the ritual from historical records, folklore archives, and I interviewed musicians, lecturers and researchers who themselves have an interest in this tradition. However, as a researcher interested in sound studies, what struck me more than anything is that it was difficult to find any sound files of in-situ keens at a funeral /wake scenario. In my notes around this time I wrote:

I wonder is there is there a soundscape of Irish funerals? How do we find the historical sound?

The three audio examples of old keens that exist, were recorded in the mid twentieth century by ethnomusicologists and were not recorded in situ. With that initial curiosity about how it sounded and the more I delved into the existing research, my interest developed further, and this led me to investigate what had happened to the Irish lament tradition and eventually led to this study.

When I came across the work of Patricia Lysaght (1997), Angela Bourke (1988), Brendan Ó Madagáin (1982) and then later the work of Micheál Briody (2007), I realised that keening as a funeral ritual had died out in Ireland in the 1950's, even though it had been recorded from as far back as the eighth century (Lysaght, 1997) and likely existed much further back before it had begun to be written about. I was also intrigued to learn that it was mostly a women's tradition and was shocked that its decline was hastened because it (along with other wake practices), was regarded as too 'wild' for both Victorian colonialist sensibilities as well as middle class Irish ones, which were mostly formed by the rise of Catholic Church conservatism (Lysaght, 1997; Lloyd, 2013). I learned that the Catholic Church had in fact tried vociferously and determinedly for many centuries to ban its performance. I also learned that there was much more to keening than it being just an old

woman wailing at a wake or in the graveyard, which is how it was mostly portrayed over the centuries and how it seems mostly to be remembered today.

Significantly, I came to understand that keening had some very important social functions in its day. However, compared with other forms of Irish folk culture that have been documented and cherished, keening was not necessarily looked upon as an Irish tradition to be proud of or to be documented or promoted, especially during the formation of the new Irish state in the early twentieth century. My curiosity has driven my exploration of this and other lament traditions. I was interested especially in positing whether a lost tradition which had been so important could potentially be revived, so that it could be used again today in some way.

Further investigations led me to discover that similar lament traditions existed in other countries and I was inspired particularly by James Wilce's (2009) *Crying Shame: Metaculture, Modernity, and the Exaggerated Death of Lament*, which offers an in-depth overview of lament traditions from many parts of the world.

Particularly in regard to lament in the European context, I became interested in the story of the Karelian lament tradition. Wilce had already spent several years researching and writing about it, and it was interesting to me because it seems that this lament tradition had gone along a similar trajectory as the Irish one until the late 1990's. Wilce discovered that around that time, that some people in Finland had begun to look at reinvigorating this tradition and he came across a group called '*Äänellä Itkijät*' who had developed a method of repurposing the old Karelian lament tradition in a workshop or retreat type of setting. He found that people who were engaging with this new way of doing lament in the group were utilising it as a healing tool in their lives. I was fascinated by this, and I decided to make contact with the group to find out more. After I spoke to the person who has been instrumental

in this revival effort, I decided to make an exploratory trip to Finland in January 2017 where I met several members of *Äänellä Itkijät*, the lament revival group.

This set me on the journey over the following five years which brought me first to Helsinki and to meeting with the most inspirational Pirkko Fihlman, one of the founders of *Äänellä Itkijät*, and her friend and collaborator Tuomas Rounakari, both of whom had been leading lament revival using a workshop model since its early days in the late 1990's. According to Pirkko and Tuomas, the Finnish lament revival and its workshop model has today transmitted the skill of lament composition (based on the Karelian tradition) to thousands of new people and has demonstrated, by the continued popularity of the courses and the reported efficacy of lament that it has become a valuable healing tool for many Finnish people.

This thesis details my visit to Helsinki and how I became immersed in the lament world and became involved in setting up keening workshops in Ireland through which we have attempted to reappraise, re-think and reimagine this seemingly very much maligned and misunderstood Irish women's tradition. The reimagining of the keening process has without doubt demonstrated that this denigrated women's tradition, stigmatized for centuries and viewed from some perspectives as inconsequential, insignificant and unimportant, holds immense value to the mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing of people in the contemporary world.

A point to note is the terminology used to describe Irish lament, can be a somewhat contentious issue as it can be referred to as '*caoineadh*' (which is the Irish language term) but is also commonly understood as 'keening' which is the anglicized version. To avoid confusion and to avoid falling into the pitfall of being criticised for grammatical errors in the use of the Irish term, I have chosen to use the term 'keening', throughout, as it is well

understood as meaning the same thing, both in the historical context and in contemporary contexts.

Although this thesis is mostly concerned with the contemporary iterations of keening, it is important to offer some contextual information about the Irish lament tradition or custom of keening which was historically practiced as a funerary ritual (also performed on other occasions but mostly reported at funerals). Keening is considered by many scholars today as a sophisticated, orally transmitted custom which was cried/sung in the Irish language in regular communal gatherings at wakes and burials, at evictions and at times of emigration. Therefore, to begin with Chapter 3, summarizes some of its commonly known features as part of funeral ‘wakes’ up to the early twentieth century and highlights conjectures around its function in Irish society in past centuries. I discuss here also some of the reasons and speculations as to why keening declined as a practice between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and how little we actually know of how keening sounded in its heyday. I also discuss other sites where the practice of keening might have concentrated when it became unpopular in the funerary setting.

In a discussion about the reviving or reimagining of old rituals and traditions (such as the Irish and Finnish lament focused on here), there are complexities involved which also need to be contextualized at the beginning of this thesis. Chapter 4 therefore, offers various perspectives on ritual studies through a study of religions lens. The term ‘ritual’ itself is problematised and the important relationship between ritual and oral cultures is explored. Some of the debates around what is considered as ‘tradition’ are also highlighted. With regard to the subject of reviving or repurposing of traditions and their rituals, I refer to Grimes (2000) who submits that even though everyday life in contemporary society can be devoid of ritual, especially now that people are less involved with religious institutions as they might have been in the past, people still possess what he terms a natural ‘ritual consciousness’ and still

seek out ritual in their lives. This he explains, can be because it can foster a sense of being part of a community which in turn cultivates an important sense of ‘belonging’ to something. This often sends ritual ‘seekers’ on a search for connections with groups of likeminded others to do things in communion that might have a focus on a ‘traditional’ element, such as connecting to their ancestors or their language or their lost histories and these activities can often incorporate ritual enactment. When groups set out to re-establish that ritual consciousness, they often seek out older and what they consider more ‘authentic’ rituals (or parts of rituals) either from their own, or other communities. However, in that process they at times unknowingly can cause upset to the cultures that they commonly borrow from and to those who wish their ritual traditions to be preserved in stasis. It is demonstrated however, that ritual traditions, particularly in oral cultures, would likely have continually changed and morphed over time. It is highlighted here how important it is for people to have meaningful connections with past traditions and rituals, and to have the possibility (and the permission) to make adaptations to them, in order to serve that ritual consciousness in the contemporary world.

An example of how traditions and their rituals can adapt and change is that of the Karelian lament and Chapter 5 focuses on a brief history of Karelian lament tradition and explains about the development of the revival of that tradition and its rituals by *Äänellä Itkijät*. It also explains why this revival of lament has been so important to some of the modern lamenters that I met on my visit to Helsinki. The chapter addresses some of the debates that have arisen in Finland around the lament revival efforts by *Äänellä Itkijät* with regards to authenticity and the potential dilution of culture.

Chapter 6 gives detailed account of my trip to Helsinki where I met one of the very influential people to me in this project, Pirrko Fihlman who has been the figure behind *Äänellä Itkijät* since it began. I explain how Pirrko welcomed me into her home with open

arms and told me she taught me ‘everything she knows’ about the Karelian lament tradition and its revival. She set up meetings for me with English speaking lamenters and scholars, so that I could get a flavour of what she, and the other major influence in this Irish reimagining project, Tuomas Rounakari, had been doing with lament revival workshops for over twenty years. The chapter describes how the lament workshops are run and presents my recollection of my own fledgling steps into lament composition. In this chapter, I recount my first experience of a group lamenting gathering, where I witnessed the deep bonds of friendships between a group of people (members of *Äänellä Itkijät*), who have over the years shared their deepest hurts and traumas with each other through the practice of lament.

Chapter 7 describes in detail how, after my visit to Helsinki, I began to speak at conferences and talks and give interviews on podcasts, and for newspaper articles, about my experience there and how this developed into an ambition to start a research project that would explore how keening might possibly be reimagined in Ireland in a similar way to Finland. I recognised an increasing interest from people that I spoke to, in the idea of trying a keening workshop, based on what we know of the old Irish tradition and using workshopping model that the *Äänellä Itkijät* group in Finland have been using. I describe how through a set of fortuitous events during 2017 and 2018, I was able to invite the Finnish teacher of contemporary Karelian lament Tuomas Rounakari (who I had met in Helsinki) to Cork to teach a one-day pilot lament workshop. I also talk about how I met Tanya Bryan who became instrumental in the organisation of the first ever ‘Keening Workshop’ weekend retreat in West Cork. In this chapter I describe, in step-by-step detail, these two Irish keening workshops and how they turned out to be incredibly powerful experiences both for me and for the other workshop participants.

Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11 are dedicated to an analysis of the most important themes that emerged from the ethnographic data gathered from the participants in the Irish workshops.

In the process of analysing the data collected, I realised that the terms being used by my collaborators about how they experienced the workshops were touching on methodologies and terminologies being explored in diverse areas of study including anthropology, history, folklore, memory studies, heritage studies, psychiatry, geography, psychology and social psychology, post-colonial theory, and sound and vibration studies; thus there was an interesting meeting point of emic and etic viewpoints.

When I was going through the data that I had collected, I realised that one of my biggest hurdles would be to communicate the meaning-making involved in the workshop events and the deeply meaningful experiences of the participants, including myself. I'm trying to describe something nebulous as 'felt' connections to 'spirit', 'ancestors', 'forces', 'source', 'connection' 'deep bonding', vibration' and all of the terms that were coming through from my collaborators. In this thesis, I have been guided in the first instance by the emic terms used by my research collaborators both in Finland and in Ireland who have been with me both in person and in spirit the whole way since I began to think about the significance of keening for Ireland and the contemporary world.

### Contribution to Knowledge

As far as I am aware, this is the first such exploration of keening in contemporary times using improvisational composition techniques in a workshop/retreat setting. This research makes an important interdisciplinary contribution to knowledge by introducing an innovative theoretical framework that brings attention to the often-marginalized subject of sound studies within the study of religions. This research expands the existing body of sound studies research within the study of religions and demonstrates how auditory experiences are central to understanding and knowing the contemporary world. Drawing from anthropology, musicology, and philosophy, the study offers new insights into modern spirituality, ritual, and cultural memory and deepens our understanding of lament as a healing modality.



## **Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework**

Exploring a variety of theoretical and methodological ideas when doing ethnographic research to better understand peoples lived experience is not novel and finds researchers seeking out multimodal and multidisciplinary theoretical and methodological schemas for the analysis of data. However, researching non-tangible aspects of the experiences of other people, i.e. the senses, emotions, sound, vibration, and felt ‘spiritual’ connections has its challenges because this kind of research cannot be wholly explained through biological or neurological or other ‘materialist’ theoretical lenses. The value of ethnographic methodology, researcher reflexivity, and auto-ethnography is increasingly being acknowledged as a means of uncovering and analysing the lived reality for research participants and I will discuss this further in the Methodology chapter.

However, there are scholars who hold that this form of research is often not taken seriously, and that the dominant objectivist and materialist expectations of academia are sometimes too restrictive. What is considered by many researchers as the existence of a materialist hegemony in academia is being challenged by those who are increasingly ‘engaging experientially with their own inner experiences, willing to explore the hypothesis that their internal world is as vast and worthy of exploration as is the physical world’ (Walton, 2017, p. 31). As a result, there have been many calls in the past few decades from scholars in different disciplines for the development of new methodological, hermeneutical and analytical tools, and new perspectives and voices, which might better facilitate non-materialist analyses such as for example those who feature in this thesis, notably (Bell, 1997) (Classen, 1993) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) (Goody, 1973) (Rosa, 2019) (Hoffman, 2015) (Schulze, 2012) (Sterne, 2012) (Magnat, 2019). In the analysis of the ethnographic data which emerged from this study, the viewpoints of these scholars have been valuable for me in my efforts to explain what happens emotionally, bodily and spiritually for my research

collaborators and also in relation to how I navigate my own experiences as a participant researcher. Lived realities and feelings as well as unexplainable but felt as real worldviews have often been observed by researchers through a sensory lens and sensory studies scholars such as Constance Classen (1993, 1997) has argued that one of the most important tasks of scholars dealing with the senses in their research is to uncover meaning in the sensory practices of particular cultures. Sound as a pathway to understanding spiritual ‘life-worlds’ and meaning-making processes has also been central to my own research interests within the field of study of religions (Caulfield, 2014), therefore, in this thesis it is one of the main theoretical focuses. I make use of a synthesis of theories found in sound studies and the study of religions and draw attention to them as an important academic tool of analysis. Theoretical ideas found in ritual studies, orality and literacy studies, materiality, cultural identity studies, memory studies, trauma studies, and indigenous studies have been interesting to explore.

Themes of ephemerality, spirituality, consciousness, and the ‘other than human’ (Price & Chao, 2023) are familiar ones within the interdisciplinary field of the study of religions, which is why this study is also well situated within its theoretical and methodological frameworks. Given that in historical context, keening was a traditional ritual performed at funerary wakes, so in a study which focuses on a re-imagining of this tradition, it is necessary to discuss the significance of ritual studies. Theorizing about rituals and their meanings developed from classic theorists of religions in the early twentieth century such as Frazer, Robertson Smith, Tylor, Durkheim, Mauss, van Gennep, Freud, Malinowski, Gluckman and Geertz, and further developed into a field of study in its own right with established theorists such as, Douglas, Huxley, Turner, Leach, Goffman and Rappaport. Kreinath et al. (2007), usefully gathers the breadth of scholarship in ritual studies from 1966 to 2005, spanning several disciplinary fields and methodologies. With such a diversity of theoretical frameworks within which ritual can be explored and analysed, it is not surprising that

academic interpretations of rituals can change over time and the practice and meaning of the rituals can also change, depending on the changing social contexts that they are performed in. Traditions have a long history of evolving over time (Hobsbawm, 1983) and it is important for my study of a funerary ritual such as keening being reimagined to be able to demonstrate that rituals can and do change and I discuss this in-depth in Chapter 4.

Making changes to rituals or borrowing parts of rituals, however, can cause conflict and upset to those who believe that their ritual practices are sacred and should never be performed out of context (Bell, 1997; Grimes, 2000). Changes in ritual practice may be rejected or feared because of the worry about ‘dilution’ of culture or may be considered as a threat to and an undermining of the important roles given to community, custom, and consensus (Bell, 1997, p. 223). I highlight here also the limitations of the textual and visual representations of ritual practices in academic representation which fixes ritual practices in place (Goody, 1973; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The written versions of past traditions and ritual events can end up becoming the ‘canonical’ entity and in many cases can become the definitive account of the way a ritual or tradition has ‘always’ been done. Oral rituals like keening have rarely been fixed and in the past were, as far as we know, mostly improvised (Lysaght, 1997; Ní Shíocháin, 2018). It is important in a study of this kind to highlight that rituals have a long history of evolving and changing and that this ‘re-imagining project’ can be viewed as another adaptation to suit contemporary needs and is a part of ongoing cultural processes.

## Sound Studies

As various scholars have highlighted (Gershon, 2013; Hackett, 2011; Hoffman, 2015; Samuels et al., 2010; Sterne, 2012) sound studies research has traditionally been situated within the study of music and ethnomusicology and has sat on the margins of the study of religions, playing a subordinate role in academia to the status of research that focuses on the

visual. Schulze (2012) tells us that before the nineteenth century, research which was focused on sound was considered ‘unscientific’ (Schulze, 2012, p. 198) but because of emerging analyses of sound through the lenses of acoustics, musicology, and anthropology an interest in the physicality of sound and the ‘corporeality’ of the sonic, an interest has grown in sound studies. Schulze explains, ‘we are, anthropologically speaking, not grids of nerve nets and electric signals (as our contemporaries love to believe)’ (p. 202) so the central focus of this new tradition was to move away from written descriptions of sound and move towards a more ‘sonic and experiential theory of the body’ (p. 203).

Ong (2002) also outlines how there has always been a privileging of the visual and of literacy over sound in academia, with studies of the aural sphere not necessarily considered as an important academic tool of analysis. Research on sound, Ong argues, is of vital importance and should be taken more seriously because it can represent what he considers as the ‘core of sensation and existence’ (Ong, 2002 , p. 71) and better enables people to understand the world. In congruence with Ong, Voegelin (2014) suggests that writing about sound is crucial for a better understanding of the world because it ‘is a constant effort to access all the fleeting and ephemeral, that which is barely there and yet influences all there is’ (Voegelin, 2014, p. 4). Gershon (2013) calls for research in and on sound to be taken more seriously and has developed a methodology he terms as ‘sonic ethnography’ arguing that sound can be ‘articulated as resonance and knowledge in ways that are significant to human experiences of sensation and signification’ and that sound serves as a ‘strong theoretical site for conceptualizing what might “count” as “data” in qualitative research’ (Gershon, 2013, p. 257). Schulze posits that ‘as sound has an almost immediately sensed impact and pervasive effect when experienced, it is necessary to modify the historically established models of sound or music as non-corporeal, ethereal, even non-physical’ (Schulze, 2012, p. 202). Becker (2004) in her observations of how people ‘trance’ through sound with ritual music,

drumming and dancing, suggested that there was no simple way of bridging the gap between studies on the physical embodiment of the brain and the phenomenological experience of ‘being-in the-world’ (Becker, 2004, p. 3). Research in sound studies often encompasses the unseen but very much felt ‘vibration’, which some scholars argue is everywhere at all times and contend therefore that any research is lacking if it does not feature the ‘sonic effect’ on bodies.

Schulze asks the question: ‘How can we adjust the foundations for speaking about sound across research cultures, in between the natural sciences?’ (Schulze, 2012, p. 202) and espouses one solution proffered by philosopher Jean Luc Nancy who suggests ‘excription’ or a ‘de-writing’ or ‘unwriting’ as a first step because it:

makes an effort to leave the scriptural paradigms of bodily concepts behind and more [sic] towards a more complex, experiential and inter-culturally as well as trans-historically adequate concept of the body that transcends theories of signs and signals and arrives at a sonic and experiential theory of the body (Nancy in Schulze, 2012, p. 203)

The significance of sound studies for this study on keening lies in its ability to shift the focus from visual-centric research to a more holistic understanding of the vibrational and sonic experiences felt by participants in keening workshops. This study is well situated within the theoretical and methodological frameworks of the field of sound studies and allows for a deeper analysis of the data which emerged.

### Belonging and Community

In addition to exploring theoretical ideas within sound studies and the study of religion, there were other thematic ideas that needed to be explored. It is thought that one of the important functions of communal rituals of the past, such as keening, were in helping a community (or groups within that community) to come to terms with loss and trauma. Similarly, contemporary lament practices are also thought to have ‘bonding’ and ‘communal healing’

functions (Wilce, 2009). In contemporary globalised society we are conditioned to be individualistic beings, however, when people engage in a group activity together as the Irish keening and Finno-Karelian lament workshop participants do, intense feelings of bonding and closeness can happen, and this phenomenon has been a subject of interest for researchers in several disciplinary fields (Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003; Rosa, 2019, von Scheve & Salmela, 2014; Hoffman, 2015). Ideas such as ‘collective emotions’ coined by Scheve & Salmela (2014) and what Rosa (2019) describes as ‘resonance’, can also be useful concepts to apply in order to explain the close bonding that participants experience in an emotionally charged group such as a keening workshop. Emile Durkheim’s ‘collective effervescence’ and Victor Turner’s idea of ‘communitas’ are useful as tools of analysis to explain the effects felt by keening workshop participants when they mention such terms as: ‘spiritual’, ‘oneness’, ‘vibrational’, ‘force’, ‘source’, ‘energy’ and when they report feeling a raising of the ‘energy level’ between the group members and in the workshop space.

Hartmut Rosa (2019) introduces a theory of ‘resonance’ for a development of a more holistic ‘sociology of world-relations’. Resonance is defined in the context of Rosa’s theory as those moments in which ‘our wire to the world begins to vibrate intensely, and our relationship to the world begins to breathe’ (Rosa, 2019, p. 27). He argues that whenever we look at another person in such a heightened state of emotion, we are psychologically designed to produce a ‘corresponding resonant reaction both in us and between us’ (Rosa, 2019, p. 79) and that this generates what he terms a ‘resonant relationship’. Rosa further argues that this highly resonant relationship is a ‘primordial’ obligation to respond (p. 78). Rosa’s theories have informed my theoretical perspective to a great extent

Theories which explore a sense of what Lambert, et al. (2013) calls ‘belongingness’ can make life more meaningful and worthwhile as well as provide people with stability, even if that ‘belongingness’ is to a shared history of trauma. Trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk

(2014) states that ‘traumatized people are out of synch with others and need synchronizing activities’ (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 122) to learn what he describes as ‘visceral tuning’ (p. 336). In his research he found that collective singing, dancing and religious ritual can all create a communal healing ‘container’ for people who have suffered trauma and healing from that trauma can begin by being in ‘sync’ with an established group. Despite the proliferation of deep-seated principles of individualism that proliferate in the contemporary world, there was a very different focus at the keening workshops where there was a ‘felt’ sense of belonging experienced by participants, and all of the above-mentioned theories related to communal belonging were useful to explore with regard to this data.

The ancient and not so ancient past of Ireland and Finland is littered with traumatic events and this study reveals that feelings of ancient connections to these traumatic histories are ‘felt’ as real by people, especially when they try to connect to a lost tradition that is reported as having been a restorative influence on a grieving community. Even if these ‘ancient’ connections are imagined in the reimagining of keening, it was useful to demonstrate through these theoretical concepts how that ‘felt’ connection – for many a spiritual connection – and a feeling of belonging together to a shared past, even if it was to a traumatic past, was an important step on a journey of healing for them as a group.

In a study of a tradition that most people in contemporary Irish society have little or no memory or knowledge of today, some concepts found within the field of memory studies were also useful avenues to explore. Memory studies is an extremely diverse area of research, and the comprehensive review of memory studies compiled by Drozdowski et al. (2016) was a useful place to begin. What was especially relevant from this vast body of research were discussions around the idea that the oft disregarded (by academia) concept of ‘nostalgia’ is a valuable ‘lens’ with which to view people’s experience with the past and how it can become an important ‘affective’ practice for wellbeing, and used to cultivate a sense of

belonging (Smith & Cambell, 2017). However, even though people at keening workshops were interested in the history of the tradition of keening, they were not necessarily interested in recreating it identically as it existed in the past. They were more interested in the possibility of reinvigorating it so that it served contemporary needs, and in how the tradition could re-emerge in some useful way and be continued for generations to come. To this end, the revivals of the tradition of keening could be categorised as per Lauri Honko's 'second life' of the tradition (Carrassi, 2017) or indeed even as a 'third life' as submitted by Wilce (2009) in his discussion of the various 'lives' of Finnish lament, concepts I discuss in my analysis

The theoretical framework that I have devised for my study is thus an amalgamation of many theoretical schemas and concepts found within the study of religions and sound studies, which are my main areas of focus, and additionally in memory studies and cultural studies more broadly. This is because these theoretical perspectives allow for a drawing together and a discussion of the myriad cultural forms, expressions and dynamics that emerged from my study of the reimagining of Irish lament. This is a unique theoretical approach in combining these perspectives from different fields and, to my knowledge, it is the first time that lament has been theorized in this multimodal way. Therefore, this study adds valuable insight to the corpus of knowledge that exists about lament, and in particular keening, in its contemporary form.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

In this chapter, I will explain the methodological approach that I used to conduct my research on lament, sound, and vibration. The methods I have used to gather the data include participant observation, ethnographic interviews, social media discourse analysis, and feedback surveys. I will also discuss the ethical and practical issues that were important to identify and deal with in my research, and the main methodological challenges that I faced during my fieldwork.

To briefly recap on my journey to this PhD project, I initially developed a personal interest in the historical tradition of keening and how its functions have been connected with the re-stabilizing of close-knit communities after the death of one of its members (Bourke, 1988; Lysaght, 1997; Ó Madagáin, 1982). My interest was piqued when I heard about the modern lament classes in Finland and the healing benefits reported by participants of those courses (Wilce, 2011a). This personal interest then coupled with my professional interest in sound studies, and, as I explained previously, inspired me to find out more about these Finnish workshops and to think about how similar workshops might work in an Irish context. When it later came to be the topic of my PhD project, that personal interest research was incorporated into the professional research project, and into a formal research framework and associated methodology. One aspect of this meant that explicit permission needed to be gained retrospectively to use notes that I made during the initial visit to Finland in 2017.

There were a number of issues and complexities that I faced while conducting this study. The main complication that arose at the outset of this research project was that it went from being a personal interest subject where I was learning about lament to it becoming a

professional doctoral level funded research project.<sup>6</sup> Before the timeline of my academic research project began, I had many conversations with people who showed an interest in academic research on lament and sound both in Ireland and Finland. Some of those people were friends or people who became friends, like those I had met in Finland. Given this situation, I knew I would easily locate potential research participants for my academic study on the topic. For instance, the facilitator of the first Irish workshop that I attended as a researcher and participant was Tuomas Rounakari who was someone that I met on my personal interest visit to Finland. The organiser of the second workshop, Tanya Bryan, was a lodger in my home for a short period of time in 2017/2018 and who in that time became very interested in my PhD topic. She was interested in the potential of being involved in a keening workshop, both for herself on a personal level (to learn how to keen) and on a professional level as it aligned very well with her own business interest as a “holistic events” organiser. Lament workshops are deeply emotional and can be life changing experiences and the bonding that occurs between participants in such an emotive atmosphere over two to three days happens at a very deep embodied level. At times I found the separation of my academic responsibility from the personal difficult to negotiate however, I recognised that it was very important for me to ensure that I carefully navigated the personal and the professional throughout the project both for myself and for those who became research participants, some of whom I had known closely beforehand as friends or as a lodger.

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<sup>6</sup> This PhD was funded by the University College Cork College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences Excellence Scholarship.

## Defining the Research Community

My research participants were individual lamenters that I met in the field and attendees at lament workshops, one which took place in Finland and two which took place in Ireland. I worked closely with selected collaborators from the workshops.

### Finland

In January 2017, as part of my initial personal interest activity, I travelled to Helsinki to find out more about the lament revival group that I had heard of, Äänellä Itkijät (translated as ‘those who cry with a voice’) which is a registered association that has been running lament classes in Helsinki and wider Finland for approximately twenty years. I came across the group when I was doing some research on lament for my final-year BA degree dissertation in the Study of Religions, and I found it mentioned in Wilce (2009). I looked the group up online and contacted Pirkko Fihlman, who was the chairperson at the time of the group to find out if there were any lament workshops (referred to by her as ‘classes’) coming up.

My intention was to learn about the association and what they do and to observe a lamenting session so that I could get a fuller picture of how it might be to see someone lamenting and perhaps to try it out myself. Pirkko organised for me to meet some lamenters that she had organised at her home, where twelve people came and went throughout the afternoon, having chats and tea and cakes before and after the lamenting session. There was a core group of eight who stayed for the lamenting session and four others, with two arriving early in the afternoon and two later in the day when the workshop was finished. It was a very casual and social occasion, and I was there as an interested observer who was also participating in the session. Pirkko arranged for me to meet some other lamenters to speak to during my stay. While I did not formally interview anyone during this visit, I have obtained retrospective consent to include in my PhD study the notes that I made during the lament

session and during other conversations as part of this visit. Additionally, I have explicit consent to use material in this study from email communications that I had with some of the people I met in Finland before and during that trip.

## Ireland

After my visit to Helsinki in January 2017, I had an idea that a project based around organising an Irish lament ‘workshop’ based on the Finnish model that I had observed in Helsinki might make an interesting research topic for my PhD. In order to see if there might be an interest in exploring this kind of workshop in Ireland, I presented my Finnish experience at the end of 2017 at a conference: November 15<sup>th</sup> -16<sup>th</sup>, Critical Voices Network Ireland, 9th Annual Critical Perspectives Conference ‘Critical perspectives on and beyond “change” in mental health services’, University College Cork with my paper titled: ‘I Cried the Victim Out of Myself’: A Re-imagination of Irish tradition of lament (‘Keening’) as a therapeutic tool for overcoming stress, loss and trauma, based on a Finnish lament revival model’. At the end of the conference, people chatted to me, and several gave me their email addresses and asked if I would contact them if a keening event was ever set up in the style of the Finnish workshop model that I had described to them. The conference was organised by the Critical Voices Network Ireland (CVNI) which is ‘a network of people interested in considering and developing responses to human distress, which are creative, enabling, respectful and firmly grounded in human rights’ (Critical Voices Network Ireland, 2023). This was a conference where people offered various perspectives in critique of, and as alternatives to, the dominant bio-medical mental health approach in Ireland. The idea for the first keening workshop in Ireland was very much inspired by requests from people who heard me speak at these talks. The research participants for the pilot workshop held at UCC in April 2018 were drawn from the list of email addresses that people left with me at these talks. The CVNI conference organiser also forwarded the details of the pilot keening workshop to the

conference email list, so some interested people came from the wider conference participants. In addition, an email was sent through the University College Cork staff email list by me, to announce the workshop and the associated seminar that I organised on the afternoon before the workshop. This workshop was kindly supported by the Study of Religions Department at UCC.

## Demographics

The people who attended the keening workshops in Ireland were from many walks of life and were a mixture of mental health service users, health service practitioners, and ancillary support services, such as art therapists and music therapists. They were mostly people who were very familiar with self-exploration and spiritual types of events and who were familiar with ‘holistic’ workshop and retreat type settings. A sample of the type of people who took part in the workshops is as follows; an End of Life ‘Doula’,<sup>7</sup> a reiki therapist, writers, musicians, art therapists, a ‘Death Café’<sup>8</sup> organiser, a sound therapist, a filmmaker, a dancer, and two academics who were the main CVNI conference organisers. There were others who attended the workshops and who were not practitioners of holistic events but who could be labelled as ‘curious’.

## The Workshops

1. UCC, 17th April 2018 (a one-day pilot workshop).

Ages 30-60 Male and female (I didn’t make a note of the ratio).

2. Bantry, Co. Cork, Ireland, 26th-28th April 2019 (weekend retreat).

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<sup>7</sup> An End-of-Life Doula supports people who have been given a terminal diagnosis, and those important to them; <https://eol-doula.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> A Death Cafe is a group directed discussion of death with no agenda, objectives or themes. It is a discussion group rather than a grief support or counselling session; <https://deathcafe.com/>

Attendees: Nineteen people including me and the two facilitators.

Research collaborators: Five participants of the pilot workshop at UCC completed a survey afterwards and consented to the survey results being used anonymously as part of this project. One other person gave feedback through a WhatsApp message to me afterwards and gave me consent to use this feedback as part of the PhD project.

Five participants from the Weekend retreat centre workshop agreed to be interviewed and participate in further research after the workshop.

Ages: 35-79 (4 male/15 female).

It is interesting to consider here that all of the participants were white and middle class. I reflect on this further in my conclusion chapter.

### Participants' Motivations for Involvement

People who took part in these workshops told me that they attended because they wanted to express their feelings in a safe place without being judged. They expressed an interest, during the event or later in interviews, in exploring how keening as reimagined in a contemporary context might be useful to them as practitioners and also in their personal lives. As mentioned previously, some people in attendance were 'holistic' type event organisers themselves and were interested in exploring these Irish keening workshops to inform and inspire their own therapeutic practices. All participants communicated that they were interested in exploring the potential of learning about a new healing tool by connecting with a lost cultural practice/form.

### Workshop Organisers' Motivations

The facilitator of the pilot keening workshop held at University College Cork was Tuomas Rounakari, the aforementioned lament workshop facilitator based with lament revival group

*Äänellä Itkijät* in Finland who I met on my visit there in January 2017. As explained already, since the early days of *Äänellä Itkijät* and the lament revival movement, Tuomas has together with Pirkko Fihlman developed a basic framework of the lament ‘workshop’ or ‘class’ model. Tuomas was interested and enthusiastic to be part of my research project as he believes in the importance of lament as a healing tool, having witnessed what he regards as highly positive results for participants in Finland over the past 25 years. He told me that he felt it was very important for Ireland to ‘reclaim’ this lost tradition of keening, both as a cultural artefact and as a communal and personal healing tool. When I asked him if he would be interested in facilitating an Irish workshop, he was more than happy to oblige. Tuomas had the confidence in the process of improvisation within lament composition and had run hundreds of workshops, so to have someone as experienced as Tuomas to lead an exploratory keening workshop in Ireland was ideal. Tuomas was not paid for this pilot workshop but we asked for donations (as much as individuals could afford) from the participants towards his costs.

The second Keening workshop that I attended as a participant was a commercial weekend workshop based at a retreat centre in Bantry, West Cork and the facilitator was Tanya Bryan, a qualified integrative psychotherapist<sup>9</sup> with many years of experience and practice. As mentioned previously, Tanya and I met by chance when she came to live with me as a lodger in my home and she became interested in the ‘re-imagining’ keening idea. It so happened that at the time she was in the process of setting up her new wellbeing event company, ‘A Time to Gather’, and was seeking out projects for her first commercially run

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<sup>9</sup> Integrative Psychotherapy is composed of a collection of developmentally-based and relationally-focused concepts about the practice of psychotherapy [...] The term *integrative* refers to the full synthesis of affective, behavioural, cognitive, and physiological theory and methods of psychotherapy as well as the outcome of psychotherapy – the integration or assimilation within the client of the fragmented or fixated aspects of the personality’ (The International Integrative Psychotherapy Association, 2021).

event. She decided to run a weekend-long 'Keening' Workshop and made contact with Tuomas Rounakari (I had introduced them to each other) and she invited him back to Ireland to lead the workshop, which she co-facilitated. Tanya was responsible for the financial aspects of this workshop including receiving the monies from the participants and paying Tuomas. I was given a free place at the workshop in lieu of giving a talk about my research and the history and background of the keening. I paid for my own accommodation at the retreat centre.

### Recruitment of Research Collaborators

Tanya as the organiser ran the workshop as her own endeavour and not solely for the purposes of my research project. She was, however, inspired to run the workshop in the first place as she was interested in my research. She agreed that I could participate in the weekend retreat as part of my research and to provide me with an opportunity to approach some of the participants as potential interviewees afterwards. Workshop participants were informed in advance by her that I would be there as a researcher participating in the workshop myself as part of research for my PhD on the subject of reimagining lament. It was made explicitly clear to them in advance that research about lament was taking place at the workshop and that they could choose not to take part. They were also informed that if they so wished, they could participate further in my research by giving their contact details to arrange to participate in an interview for my research that would take place at a later date.

During the workshop itself, it was communicated to all workshop participants that research was taking place for a PhD project at University College Cork, Study of Religions Department and what the research was about. Participants were informed that, if they wished, they could volunteer (through the printed consent forms that I had on hand) to further participate in the research project, but that there was no obligation to participate in the research beyond the workshop where I would be present. Workshop participants were assured

that nothing that they said or did would be mentioned in my thesis unless they had agreed to this by signing consent forms and that they could withdraw from the research project at any time and for any reason at which point any data collected by me that related to them would be deleted and would not be included in the research project. Those who expressed interest in being interviewed following the workshop were assured that their contributions would be anonymised in the thesis and in any publications or presentations arising from the research.

Before each of the Irish workshops began, I gave a talk about my research and the inspiration for it and how it led to the workshop being part of my research project. All participants who attended the workshops were therefore made aware of my role as a researcher doing a PhD on the topic of the reimagining of Irish lament and what connection it had to the workshop that they were participating in. Many attendees told me they were intrigued to be taking part in what they felt was a ‘regeneration’ of a lost women’s ritual practice, and although some people weren’t going to participate further (by doing interviews), they were excited to be there participating in this exploration of reimagining an old ritual.

A private WhatsApp group was set up by the weekend retreat workshop organiser for those who were interested in participating further in the research element of the workshops, and those who joined the group gave me permission to use any comments they might make regarding the workshop in that group chat, during the period of my research. Some participants had Facebook pages where they have regularly mentioned their attendance at the workshop in their feed. I was interested in how people expressed their feelings about the workshop on social media and was using this, with their permission, for observation on the discourses around keening rather than quoting material directly in my thesis. In my documentation, research participants are not linked in any way to Facebook posts/comments in threads on public pages. Every effort has been made to ensure that no one in the workshops

is identifiable from anything that I might impart in relation to them either from interviews, WhatsApp chats, Facebook observations, or feedback surveys.

### Ethical Considerations

My research project has been approved by University College Cork's Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC), Log Number 2021-207. I have permission from my Finnish research collaborators to use any material that is useful from casual conversations that I had with people there. I also gained permission to use material from our emails and any recordings or videos that I made while there. Some of these research collaborators in Finland also agreed to my using their real names and the real name of the public lament revival group, *Äänellä Itkijät*, that they are members of.

Certain individuals wished for me to use their real names and to use the real name of the lamenting group. This was important for them, and we discussed the potential risks and benefits of using their real identities in my research project. They explained to me that they had been involved in this lamenting group for over twenty years in Finland and were proud of their activities and roles in the revival movement and their status as tradition bearers. For this reason, they wished their real identities to be included in the research. They are public figures in the sense that what they do and say about their experiences is much reported on in the media and they are often personally named in media publications. In addition, there have already been some academic articles published about what these individuals do, and those articles used their real names. There are CD recordings of their work and there are many videos and face-to-face recordings in the public realm about their work that clearly identifies them. This is a very well-established initiative in Finland and there is much information openly published about these workshops which includes reference to the workshop participants. This information is available from various sources including academic journals, media forums, the internet, and TV and radio documentaries. I wished to make reference to

some of these sources since it shows the popularity of this phenomenon. Given my wish to use these sources and their wish to have the real names used, the most appropriate decision was to use the real names. All other names used in the thesis are anonymised to protect the identities of research participants. I have not included detail of other people's laments aside from general themes to protect their privacy. I recorded the Pilot workshop at UCC for my own use in order to listen back to the order of the day and it has some people's private lament themes on it. I do not have permission to share these laments as participants requested that they not be published. I also made some recordings and took some pictures at the lament session in Helsinki, again just for my own reference but again have not included them to protect people's privacy. These recordings which will be deleted as soon as the project is finished. I did not have permission to record any parts of the keening workshop weekend retreat. I have not made any recordings of other people's laments in other workshops to protect their privacy.

### Gender Dimension of the Research

There are some important gender dimensions of the research, as traditionally lamenting was predominantly the role of women and in modern workshops both in Ireland and Finland there is a strong presence of women of all ages. In my later chapter on historical Irish lament, I show how women and the sound of their crying voices were deemed to be essential for the spiritual aspect of the wake. I describe how in their keening eulogies they often interspersed ideas around revenge and rebellion, and I also highlight how women lamenters were in some cases deemed as seditious and rabble-rousing. I also discuss how throughout the centuries women's folk practices such as keening were often a subject of derision by people writing about Ireland and its customs. I highlight also how the Catholic Church in Ireland, as records reflect, apparently did its utmost to banish women lamenters from funerals. Women's

traditions were often also neglected by the Irish Folklore Commission during the early twentieth century and it was not given the status of some other Irish traditions.

The women's sphere is important in this revival movement and my research brings this women's practice into the spotlight. However, in contemporary times men have shown an interest in this tradition also, and in the modern lament workshops both in Ireland and Finland, there have been male participants and teachers; I refer in particular to Tuomas Rounakari who has been important in the revival movement in both countries. In addition, much academic attention was recently brought to the Finnish and Irish traditions by James Wilce who, for his own research was a participant in several of the Finnish workshops (Wilce, 2009). Wilce has produced several publications in the English language about the Finno-Karelian lament. In fact, one of the academic texts that I first came across which mentioned keening as a potential therapeutic remedy for grief in the contemporary world was written by a male scholar Roger Grainger (1998).

### Age

All participants in my research were over the age of eighteen and this is because these kinds of workshops are restricted to adults. Keening workshops could possibly benefit younger people, but this is beyond the scope of this project. There was a mix of adult age groups attending the workshops from people in their early twenty's up to their seventies. The majority of attendees however would have been in their thirties to fifties age group. There was one person in their 70's.

### Dealing with Potential Distress

One of the ethical issues that I needed to consider at the outset was how to manage any emotional distress of participants during the workshops or during or after interviews. This entailed being sensitive to the potential emotional impact of lamenting on myself and others.

Lamenting can be a cathartic but also a traumatic experience for some people who may have unresolved or repressed grief or pain or who may be deeply affected by thoughts of lost loved ones or past experiences. The participants in both of the Irish workshops, where the bulk of my collaborators were drawn from, knew through the consent forms that they could contact me if they needed any support. Had anyone contacted me in distress after the pilot workshop, I would have provided them with a list of HSE registered national counselling services. The organiser of the weekend retreat, as mentioned earlier, is a qualified psychotherapist and took her own responsibility for the aftercare of the participants if they needed support. However, in the consent forms that the participants filled out where they agreed to be interviewed by me, I also gave information about the national services.

### Nature of Data Being Collected and Methods of Collection

The data collected from the keening workshops is participants' accounts of experiences and their perspectives of taking part in the workshops.

My methods of data collection were:

- Participant observation, discussed further below, which involved attending and taking part in two keening workshops in Ireland and one in Finland. I observed and recorded as much as I could by notetaking of the activities, interactions, and ways of speaking of the workshop facilitators and participants. I also recorded by notetaking, details of the sounds and vibrations that were produced and perceived by me during the workshops.
- Casual conversations and emails from both Finnish and Irish collaborators.
- Ethnographic Interviews: I conducted semi-structured interviews with some of the Finnish and Irish workshop facilitators and some participants of the Irish workshops. Flexibility in the interviews was more important than consistency of format in the

way of a set questionnaire, as participants needed to have the freedom to express their views and feelings. Five workshop participants were interviewed face-to-face and audio recorded. I asked them about their motivations for taking part in the workshops, and their expectations, impressions, feelings, and insights regarding the workshops. I transcribed the interviews for analysis.

- The dedicated WhatsApp group named ‘Curious Keeners’ that had been set up by the event organiser Tanya Bryan for discussion of the workshop was analysed; texts separate to the WhatsApp group were also sent to me by some of my research participants (including some of those who were also interviewed in person) about their impressions and thoughts after the workshops.
- Survey feedback forms were issued after the pilot workshop at UCC to those who had agreed to allow me to contact them afterwards and five people responded. The survey form questions and the answers were copied and transferred to a secure University College Cork Cloud storage folder before the original forms were deleted. I have included some of these responses in my thesis.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis process was conducted in multiple stages according to the method of collection previously outlined. I applied a colour coded system initially to identify themes that began to emerge from my transcribed interview notes and any recorded messages that were left for me by participants through WhatsApp messages. This thematic coding was then extended to material gathered from surveys or other WhatsApp messages which I had transferred into a Word document. Once I had gathered all informant material in one document, I then reviewed all of the discourse repeatedly until some really strong central themes began to emerge. At this stage I no longer needed the colour coding as I was able to

place the emergent themes under headings and subheadings. These overarching themes eventually formed the basis for the chapter titles, while additional emergent themes that could not be included due to word count limitations are discussed in the conclusion.

During any previous analytical work, including my MA and BA dissertations, the guidance of Pierre Bourdieu's work (1991) has been valuable. He emphasizes the importance of allowing sufficient time to absorb both the emotional resonance and the memory of one's field participation. Bourdieu also advocates for patience in re-reading texts and when engaging deeply with the thinking process, to allow themes to emerge organically and instinctively. Whilst this approach is a very time-consuming one, I feel it particularly well suited to my style of analysis because it allows for a very deep re-immersion into the field multiple times. The keening workshops were an intense immersive experience for me both as a participant and observer, so it was very useful to consider my personal reflections alongside what the participants were sharing with me.

### Participant Observation

It is useful to note here with regard to my being a participant at the workshops and also being the researcher that it highlighted to me the complex nature of my positionality both inside and outside of the workshops. It was important to experience the workshop fully, but I also had to be cognisant of ensuring that I was also in observation mode as a researcher. This was difficult at times because of the emotionally intense nature of the workshops, but the way that I handled this was to write in my fieldnotes at the end of the day about my own experiences and feelings and to try and get a sense of the reactions and activities of the other participants. It was also important to try to remember the sounds and vibrational senses involved. Where I felt that I didn't take part as much as others in the workshops was when I left the evening 'social' gatherings early to go back to my room to write up my notes. I also felt that I was not 'processing' as much emotional baggage as some people were so sometimes, I worried before

the workshops began that I wouldn't have anything to lament about. This, however, turned out not to be a problem and I discuss this in my analysis chapters.

### On Researcher Reflexivity

Throughout the whole period of my research, I wrote personal reflections on my own experiences and reactions during and after the Irish and Finnish lament workshops. This was a way of recording my memories as well as expressing and exploring my own subjectivity, emotions, thoughts, and sensations related to keening, sound, vibration, and spirituality. The subjective and individual experience of lamenting is very visceral, embodied, and at times what I would describe as 'otherworldly'. I found these experiences connected me through my own personal participant journey with the wider cultural and social contexts of my research. I pondered the question of how I could represent such a deep emotion-inducing experience both for me and for my research collaborators, while attempting to remain objective, which is the expectation of academia.

Lament is a fully embodied practice, one which would be difficult to understand and speak about without having experienced it personally. In the kind of deep experiential participation that I became involved with during this period of research, it was at times difficult to create a boundary between my personal feelings and emotions and my professional role as a researcher. Audrey Kleinsasser (2000) tells us that 'the infusion of reflexivity represents a complicated and vulnerable anthropology' (Kleinsasser, 2000, p. 156). During an ethnographic study which by its nature involves participation with the subject of one's study, especially in the case of something as embodied and deeply emotional as a keening workshop, it is impossible to separate the writing about the theoretical frameworks, the methodology, the timelines, the ethical considerations, the data collection and the analysis of that data, from one's own reflexivity and thoughts.

Similarly, Takahashi & Olaveson (2003) tell us that the ‘experiential’ approach is rooted in the recognition that not only are the notepad and the tape recorder tools of the anthropologist in the field, but the entire person of the anthropologist is a research ‘tool’ (Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003, p. 75). This was the approach which they employed themselves when researching Canadian rave culture as a spiritual experience. They highlighted that the data, collected through their bodies when they attended raves, was as important to report on as the quantitative data they collected through surveys and questionnaires. Takahashi and Olaveson suggested that without paying close attention to their own ‘personal phenomenology’ throughout the fieldwork process, much of the important data could be lost (p.75). They asserted that most other academic researchers of rave culture who had published at the time of their study had failed to describe the phenomenon of rave culture adequately, because most had never immersed themselves fully in it and they had not included their own subjective experience in the data analysis. They further argue that a researcher’s ‘embodied’ knowledge that is gathered as data means that a ‘true dialogism is possible, an interiority is established’ (Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003, p. 77), engendering meaningful shared experiences, which profoundly change the research outcomes.

However, this kind of data which is informed by subjective experience has often not been taken seriously in the history of the anthropological discipline, particularly accounts of emotional or spiritual or ‘otherworldly’ experiences felt by researchers or their research participants. More recently in anthropology, study of religions, and other fields, there have been moves to include researcher experience in the dataset. Researchers like Takahashi and Olaveson hold that what they term as ‘radical empiricism’ is essential in any respectful and serious ethnographic inquiry and ‘especially so when one is trying to get at the heart of an (extraordinary) experience of a cultural group’ (Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003, p. 75).

Therefore, in this study, my own participatory experiences are considered as much ‘primary data’ as that of my research collaborators.

### Short term Ethnography and Deep Immersion

It is interesting to recognise here the debate that exists within ethnographic circles about how much time should be spent in the field and what level of immersion might be deemed as necessary in order to gain useful information about what might be meaningful for research participants. Takahasi and Olaveson (2003) above, emphasize how necessary the inclusion of their own deep personal experiential and immersive experiences were as a research methodology so that they could fully understand the spiritual and emotional dimensions of rave culture. With the nature of raves being mostly weekend events and not situated in a permanent location, it was not possible for these researchers to live with a rave ‘community’ for a long period of time, but they participated in the raves at weekends over a period of eight months (Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003, p. 76).

Conventional ethnography (in an anthropological sense) has traditionally involved long periods of time spent living fully as a member of a particular community and is characterised by ‘lots of hanging around waiting for things to happen’ (Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 355). However, researchers such as Takahasi and Olaveson successfully demonstrate that they were able to gain a deep understanding of the spiritual and emotional dimensions of the rave experience by attending them in short but intense bursts. This differs in methodological terms to traditional ethnography and is described as ‘short-term’ ethnography, characterized as involving ‘forms of intensity that lead to deep and valid ways of knowing’ (Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 351).

In a short-term research focus period, the ethnographer is often at the centre of the action and clearly states their intention from the beginning and participants are fully aware of the

researcher's involvement and their project goals. Rather than short-term or 'focused ethnographies' being what some might regard as being 'superficial', it is argued that instead, they are more often than not very data intensive with the first-hand experience of the ethnographer as a 'core element in the way that she or he comes to know about other people's lives and experiences' (p. 353). The quality of data collected, and types of 'ethnographic knowing' generated, from short periods spent in a 'field' can be just as valuable and important as those discovered by spending long periods of time (p. 355). Short term, focused ethnography, whilst inspired by long-term ethnographic fieldwork methods to some extent, is a valuable 'route to producing alternative ways of knowing about and with people and the environments of which they are part' (p. 359). The periods of fieldwork where I participated in keening workshops may have been short-term, but it was in those long days and nights spent so deeply immersed in the emotional intensity of the lament process, that led to rich insights and where deep bonds were forged. This study and its short-term intense approach and immersion demonstrates that, depending on the context and approach, it is possible to find meaningful ethnographic understanding both from brief and extended engagements with one's chosen field.

### Ethnography and Emotion

As mentioned above, keening workshops were deeply personal and emotional experiences both for me as the researcher and for the workshop participants, so throughout this project I had to carefully consider how I as a researcher could manage the personal emotional element of this kind of participatory research, described as the 'emotional labour' (Hubbard, et al., 2001, p. 121) alongside my professional obligations as a researcher. Through this process I endeavoured to try to understand if and how the emotional experiences of both me as the researcher and of my research collaborators impacted my understanding and analysis of the data that I was collecting.

Traditionally in academia, researchers were often cautioned about getting too close to, or establishing too close a rapport with, respondents because of the danger that they might lose the distance and objectivity deemed essential to ‘scientific’ research and potentially endangering the quality and integrity of the data. However, the idea that a researcher is simply an ‘instrument’ to facilitate the collection of data which is unsullied by personal feelings is refuted by Hubbard et al. (2001) based on their own experiences of fieldwork (p. 120). They argue that the ‘emotionality of the research process is a vital part of the investigation’ because ‘the emotions of the respondent and also those of the researcher are likely to influence and inform our understandings of the topic under investigation’ (Hubbard, et al., 2001, p. 121). Reflecting on my own experience, the strong emotions encountered by me and witnessed by me during my participation in the keening workshops were a very important part of how I understood the experiences of my collaborators as the researcher during the process of data gathering and in thinking about the thematic tendencies which emerged during the analysis of the data.

It is also important to recognise while conducting and writing about this kind of research that participation can bring up emotional and sometimes traumatic subjects for oneself and for one’s research collaborators. It is essential to be aware that one is doing research in a group where one is witnessing memories of trauma and to be cognisant of how to negotiate this. As a researcher there are certain dangers that one could be open to when hearing about another’s traumatic experience, and whilst as a researcher one must ensure that the research participants are protected from any potential harm, one must also engage in self-care. I discuss these dilemmas further in my analysis chapters.

Ethnographic methodology seemed the most appropriate way to gather data about people’s experiences of keening workshops because it allowed me to completely immerse myself as a participant in the workshops and to see what it was actually like and how it felt.

Some of my research collaborators expressed a wish to explore keening workshops as an experimental process for themselves and my methods of data collection seemed most apt for trying to gain insight into the meaning-making processes of other people as well as my own journey. Spradley (1979) holds that one way to ensure that the goals of ethnography meet the needs of people is that, rather than beginning one's research with a theoretical problem, he suggests that instead an ethnographer's research topics and research agenda should be determined by, and relate to, informants' expressed needs (Spradley, 1979, p. 14). Spradley suggests that one way to be able to synchronize these human needs with the accumulation of scientific knowledge is through 'strategic research' which should begin with an interest in human problems rather than focusing on a particular culture or a particular theoretical concern.

Spradley further contends that when such human problems are identified and changes are deemed as needed, then reliable information is also needed to support the development of strategic research priorities, in order to make those necessary changes happen (Spradley, 1979, p. 15). He gives the example of how in one instance an anthropologist who was conducting ethnographic research among the Navaho community became concerned that there was no adequate medical care available to this community and felt that such a service could be developed to work alongside traditional Navaho healing methods. A strategic research project was initiated by the anthropologist in conjunction with the community and health professionals which resulted in the documentation of Navaho medical knowledge in a ten-volume encyclopaedia. This helped Navaho healers and health professionals of the conventional institutionalised system to work together and appreciate each other's medical knowledge. It had the effect of preserving Navaho medical knowledge and the adaptation of conventional modern medicine for effective use among the Navaho. Indeed, Spradley deems it possible through ethnography for hundreds of strategic research projects to be developed

which can examine things like how social policy is determined, how corporate decisions are made and how lobbying can affect legislature (in this case in American states). Spradley holds that when corporations do eventually make changes in the public interest, ethnographic descriptions can serve as a useful record and a model for others to begin the process of a change for good (p. 16). Although I had no intention of lobbying for anything politically or legislatively, as in the above example, I felt that a research project using ethnographic methodology had great value.

In focusing on a lament practice, which scholars have considered to have had a restorative function in the past, my research could document how the modern practice is serving as a healing tool for the present and what the participants think and feel about their experiences of these workshops. Before delving into the chapters which focus on my ethnographic research and before I discuss the complexities of ritual and ritual adaption, it is important for the reader to understand what constitutes ‘lament’ and to tell the story of the Irish lament tradition of ‘keening’. The next chapter focus on this.

## Chapter 3: Keening - History and Decline of Irish Lament

### Characterising Lament

Lament is thought to have been practiced as part of funerary practices in most cultures across the world for many thousands of years (Lysaght, 1997, p. 66), and very early depictions of grieving women thought to be lamenting have been found, for example, on the walls of Egyptian tombs (Holst-Warhaft, 1992). Lament was also recorded in Classical Greece (Porter, 2013, p. 15). To briefly explain what constitutes ‘lament’ as a category, I present a definition of lament proposed by Wilce (2009):

Lament is a discursive and musical genre linked with crying and with funerary observances but also used in other contexts. This preserves the definitive heart of “traditional” lament, while admitting broader uses of the term (Wilce, 2009, p. 25).

There is no clear evidence available to tell us when lamenting as a funerary practice began in Ireland, but Lysaght (1997) informs us that written records intimating that lamentation was ‘an integral part of the funeral ritual and the honour of the deceased’ in Ireland, go back as far as the ninth century (Lysaght, 1997, p. 66). Lysaght also tells us that there is other evidence from commentaries about Ireland in the twelfth century written by visitors to the country describing how Irish people lamented for their dead (p. 66). In Ireland, lament linked with funerary observances is commonly referred to today as ‘keening’ and the lamenter is referred to as a ‘keener’. Up until the early twentieth century, Irish funeral activities and the rituals performed around them were generally referred to as the ‘wake’ and were located in the home of the deceased and featured in the funeral procession to the graveside. Having a keener as part of the wake was considered an essential and expected part of the Irish funeral (Ó Súilleabháin, 1967).

In oral cultures, which Ireland would have predominantly been before its colonisation by Britain, knowledge of ritual traditions was usually transmitted orally and by bodily practice (Lloyd, 2011, pp. 49-84). Keening was one of those orally transmitted traditions. It was cried/sung mostly in the Irish language<sup>10</sup> and most commonly at funerals and wakes but also on other occasions of parting such as emigration<sup>11</sup> (often referred to as the ‘American Wake’).<sup>12</sup> Like lamenting traditions in other cultures, the practice of keening in Ireland was dominated by women known as ‘*mna caointe*’ or ‘keening women’, and the laments or ‘keens’ were ‘composed in performance’ (Lysaght, 1997, p. 70). Keens were simultaneously cried, wailed, and sung in a largely unstructured fashion by women who were skilled at weaving a collection of narratives drawn from stock motifs into their own store of remembered and newly composed material. This meant that the keening woman’s self-composed material could be slotted into well-known local traditional tunes and structures. The skill of keening is reported to have been passed down through generations and learned by oral repetition and attendance at regular communal ritual occasions from childhood (Lysaght, 1997). Keening women were often a member of the deceased’s family, but if a family member was not available or not experienced enough in the craft, more suitably ‘qualified’ local lamenting women might be called for. These women would often be paid for their services in cash but often also rendered their services in exchange for drinks and tobacco and food (Lysaght, 1997). If there was no one considered as skilled enough in the nearby area to lament the dead, the keening women could be summoned from farther away.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Porter (2013), however, tells us that increasingly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries keens were performed in English as to avoid censure from the Catholic Church.

<sup>11</sup> Emigration laments are not an area that I have explored but others have such as (Porter, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Emigration being considered like a death since family and friends would not likely see the person again once they got on the boat (Porter, 2013, p. 16).

<sup>13</sup> Engaging a keener who was deemed to be more skilled and who might therefore charge more for their service was something of a status symbol to demonstrate affluence, so a good keener might be sent for from further afield than the immediate locality (Lysaght, 1997).

Keening women were sent for as soon as possible after a person died and were an integral part of the funerary process throughout the three days and nights of ‘waking’ and mourning. Keeners were also present at the final funeral procession to the graveyard and inside the graveyard. Although keening is mostly associated with funerary ritual, there are reports of keening happening at other times of parting, as mentioned above, and keening was also regularly reported during the time of the Irish Famine because of the rapid increase of deaths during this period (Lloyd, 2013, p. 206).

We know that outside of a very loose framework, it appears that laments were mostly improvised, although using stock phrases and motifs (Ní Shíocháin, 2018). Each village and each keening woman would have had her own style, so one version of a keen in one area would not necessarily be representative of one in another area as the lament tuning and context would likely have been distinctively related to a townland and the personal experiences of the lamenting woman and those who her lament was in reference to. Because of its improvised nature and regional differences in local familiar tunes, keening was probably different every time that it was performed, so anyone who witnessed keening in Ireland in the past and who might have given an account of it in writing (as many observers and collectors did), could realistically only have given an incident-specific account of it.

However, lament worldwide was recognisable because of common characteristics. One of the characteristic functions of lament generally reported is that during times when communities gathered together to mark major life passages such as death, emigration, and weddings (Wilce, 2009), lament served as device which was said to have assisted the community to reorganise itself and to re-establish kinship bonds after such a disruption (Bourke, 1988). In a similar way, keening in Ireland has been described as having the function of re-stabilizing close-knit communities after the death of one of its members and alleviating the grief caused by the death of one of its members.

During the keening process the communal ‘*Gól*’ (meaning ‘cry’) was a very important point (discussed in more detail later), where everyone would join in with the keening woman and this process is said to have helped those gathered to express their sorrows freely (Bourke, 1988; Lysaght, 1997; Ní Shíocháin, 2018). Keens were said to be added to at later stages also, such as on anniversaries and birthdays, as in the example of the additions made to the famous ‘*Caoine for Art O’ Laoighre*’ (Lysaght, 1997). The keening woman, in throwing herself into her ‘madness’ and her ‘wild’ expressions of grief and sorrow in the liminal space of the funeral wake, provided an important social and community service, the importance of which is evident in the willingness to pay sometimes handsomely, to ensure the presence of a professional lamenter (Bourke, 1993, p. 166).

### The Voice of the Community

Contemporary analyses of keening in Ireland (and of other lamenting traditions worldwide in general) suggest that in times when women’s voices were rarely heard in the public arena, one of the functions of the lamenter was that of an important social mouthpiece. It is said that the improvisatory nature of lamentation allowed the keening women to cleverly weave through their partly sung/partly cried ‘dirges’ of eulogy, their own (and others), and to verbalise complaints, protests, familial sniping, gossip (Bourke, 1993) and even (magical) curses (Ní Shíocháin, 2018). The keening ritual also created a space for discussing their own often fraught relationships with their husbands and other men in society (Marren, 1993).

The vast majority of known laments in Irish were composed about men, by women, so the opposition of women's experience to men's, expressed in female discourse about male activity, is a central theme of the tradition (Bourke, 1993, p. 161).

In this important role, keeners could express their opinions on certain social topics and add narrative more freely and without censure, but this often brought them into conflict with the

prevailing male dominated society, especially the Catholic Church (Bourke, 1993; Lysaght, 1997; Ní Shíocháin, 2018).

Keening women were considered to have an essential spiritual role in the ritual passage of the soul of the deceased to the otherworld and were considered to have been an important ‘conduit’ between the living and the dead. It was widely held that no respectable funeral could happen without their presence for fear that the soul would not pass smoothly. It has been reported to me that the sound of the keening woman’s cry was an essential element in the provision of the safe passage of the soul,<sup>14</sup> particularly at the moment when she tearfully wailed a long ‘Och Ochóne!’.

The keen was comprised of three parts: salutation, dirge (lament) and the *gól* or cry, it was at the cry that the ‘Och Ochóne!’ would be wailed and the pitch raised and where everyone else would join in. In her research into modern forms of keening in Ireland, Michelle Collins (2018) tells us that she could not find a direct meaning for the phrase ‘Och Ochóne’ but understood from her interviewees that it loosely meant something like ‘my woe, my woe’ (Collins, 2018, p. 64). Collins also explains that this part of the cry was considered by some of her interviewees to be a spell word from druidic times and there is other speculation that it is an apotropaic word similar to the verbal protections found in lullabies, that is to say that it is believed to have the power to avert evil influences or bad luck. Collin’s interviewees also suggested that it was never written down because of its power as a spell word, and if it was put in the wrong hands, it was ‘like putting a sword in the hands of a child’ (Collins, 2018, p. 64). Another element of the role of the lamenting women was also to ‘converse’ with ancestors of the deceased to inform them that the deceased was on his or her

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<sup>14</sup> In conversation with Irish folklorist Dr Stiofán Ó Cadhla of University College Cork’s Folklore and Ethnology Department (interview 2018).

way (Lysaght, 1997) and the function of the cry was said to protect the soul on its journey from this world to the next. Each of the examples above reveal important aspects of the likely functions of the tradition of keening.

### Pejorative Colonial Discourse

As mentioned above, keening at Irish wakes was written about by many an observer of Irish culture and garnered particular interest throughout the nineteenth century and in the period prior to the Famine, when ‘scarcely an English traveller’s account of Irish social customs fails to discourse on the singularity of this practice’ (Lloyd, 2013, p. 208). Most accounts of keening from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century were of a negative nature and framed mostly in ‘censorious and hostile terms’ (Lysaght, 1997, p. 66). The dominance of Ireland’s oral culture was considered the site of ‘secretive silence, lament and laughter, intoxication and hunger, guile and guilelessness’ (Lloyd, 2013, p. 212). However, those who wrote negative commentaries about Irish cultural life, such as Thomas Crofton Croker writing about Ireland in the early nineteenth century, were often outsiders both linguistically and culturally with the result that ritual practices such as keening were grossly misunderstood and viewed with suspicion and as sites for sedition:

Keens are also a medium through which the disaffected circulate their mischievous principles, and this they do without much attempt at concealment, the Irish language being a sufficient cloak for the expression of seditious sentiments (Thomas Crofton Croker, quoted in Lloyd, 2013, p. 209).

Bourke (1993), in her analysis of several lament poetry examples written in Irish, concurs that seemingly innocuous but clever usage of combinations of ready motifs and common conventions would have carried messages and meanings intelligible to the inner circle but not to others in the audience, especially as it was performed in the Irish language and local dialect.

Lloyd (2013) suggests that these negative and derogatory accounts of Irish social customs by outsiders ‘sought to locate and stabilize their Celtic others in relation to their own sense of cultural and political modernity’ (Lloyd, 2013, p. 211). Lloyd asserts that in this period of time a ‘hierarchy of the senses’ existed for the British middle and upper classes, where the senses became the mechanism through which ‘good taste’ and being ‘cultured’ was measured (Lloyd, 2011, p. 60). Wilce (2009) asserts that ‘dominant discourses associate certain classes with modernity and label others ‘backward’’ (Wilce, 2009, p. 128).

There was particular critique in this regard directed at the goings on in funeral wakes and especially the keening women who partook in drinking alcohol as much as the men, which was seen as disgraceful by onlookers (Lloyd, 2013, p. 211). Regularly depicted as ‘barbarous and warlike’, ‘shiftless’ and ‘regardless of tomorrow’, the Irish personality was persistently portrayed as unpredictable, emotional, ‘tardy’, improper, and indifferent, aided by loose tongues and the over-use of alcohol. In this environment, ritual practices like keening ‘became a crucial index for an emergent ethnographic discourse on the Irish national character’ (Lloyd, 2013, p. 208).

Pejorative perceptions of Irish local keening traditions were largely derived from a colonial critique of the subjected Irish people. It was a political means of marginalisation and devaluation of local values and eventually the demeaning of local culture which makes it easier to colonise and subdue. The economic success of Britain was also dependent on its colonial subjects being brought to order and being compelled to ‘become political subjects in a modern sense, capable of self-submission to the regularity of law and of attachment to abstract principles rather than affective ties’ (Lloyd, 2013, p. 211). If they were to be of any use to the Empire, Irish subjects of the Crown needed to be ‘tamed’ and, according to Lloyd (2013), the ‘cure’ for ridding their indolent loquacious nature, was to target the Irish

language. This assault on Irish oral culture, along with post-Famine traumatization<sup>15</sup> and ‘the pragmatic realization of those who remained in Ireland that their survival depended on proficiency in English’ (Lloyd, 2013, p. 141), aided the degeneration of the Irish language and in turn, the decline in the ritual use of oral traditions such as keening.

Wilce (2009), in his discussion on the topic of the global decline of lament highlights the impact that the Enlightenment and Modernity and associated discourses and practices of racism had on lament (and on other traditions) and how those discourses fostered the notion that lament and the people who practiced it were ‘backward’ (Wilce, 2009, p. 128). Against the backdrop of the advent of the Enlightenment and ‘scientific reasoning’ as well as the emergence of ‘modernity’ which promoted ‘individualism’, national pride, and a sense of what was ‘respectable’ by the new middle classes, there was a fairly uneven contest between the traditional and the modern.

Dominant values emanate from certain centers – elites, middle classes, globally hegemonic nations those groups have inordinate influence on widely circulating ideas of respectability, backwardness, and shame (Wilce, 2009, p. 128).

The monolithic, authoritarian power systems which evolved during the few hundred years leading up to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries subsumed the local and more raucous traditions which involved displays of emotion, and which emerging states and their ‘respectable’ middle classes struggled with (Wilce, 2009, p. 129). Displays of emotions of course, in local traditions, were the preserve for the most part of women, and it is women’s emotionally directed traditions like keening that suffered most in the emergence of a modern

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<sup>15</sup> Great trauma was caused by the colossal death rate and the mass exodus of Irish speakers from the West of Ireland.

Ireland after the Famine, after the gradual separation from its colonial oppressor and in the subsequent expansive spread of the dominance of the Catholic Church. After the various attempts by the British in pre- and post-Famine years to stymie Ireland's oral culture, post-colonial Ireland saw the emergence of new conservative forms of Catholicism, which had a further adverse effect on women and their funerary practices such as the wake and ritual lament.

### Marginalisation of Women

Cara Delay (2019) quoting Seamus Enright, tells us that although in the early decades of the nineteenth century it appears that Irish women still may have held some influence and status in some parts of Irish society, with the rise of the Catholic Church in the post Famine years, their status became more disempowered and marginalised (Delay, 2019, p. 16):

Whether married wives and mothers, adult daughters, or domestic servants, and whatever their economic circumstances, in most parts of the island, women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries navigated life within an atmosphere of heightened Catholic patriarchy (Delay, 2019, p. 18).

In what Tom Inglis (1998) described as the consequences of the 'moral monopoly' that the Catholic Church controlled and policed in Irish society in the post famine years, the construction of the idea that the 'natural' role of women was that of wives and mothers, based in the home permeated (Inglis, 1998), where they could: 'create a peaceful and civilised religious space where they would influence their husbands, educate their children, and secure the future of the Irish Catholic nation' (Delay, 2019, p. 15). At the funeral 'wake' in Ireland pre twentieth century, women had a very principal role to play. In her publication *'Symbolic and Social Roles of Women in Death Ritual in Traditional Irish Society'*, Jenny Butler discusses the practice of keening, which involves women ritually lamenting for the dead. She explores the significant roles women played in death rituals, including preparing and laying

out the corpse, participating in the wake, and performing keening (Butler, 2008) highlighting the deep connection between women and death in pre-modern Irish society. The reassigning of women and their ‘natural’ role as mothers and wives and nothing more in the post famine years meant that keening was dealt a further blow in this atmosphere.

### Banishing of Keening by the Church

The custom of keening and ‘wild’ funeral wakes had for many centuries been a particular target of censure and negative discourse by the Catholic Church in Ireland, the practice becoming more and more considered an embarrassment and as bringing shame to the nation. If the keeners persisted (as some did), they were at times denounced from the pulpit and threatened with excommunication and parish priests were forbidden to take part in such ‘heathenish’ and ‘savage’ practices (Bourke, 1993, p. 161). From 1631 to 1800, the Church regularly issued edicts to banish the practice of keening from the funeral setting: ‘use all possible means to banish from Christian burials, such anti-Christian practices’ (Ó Súilleabháin, 1967, p. 139).

If the ‘criers and rhymers’ dared to continue the ‘detestable practice’, they were to be excluded from Mass and the Sacraments, which was a weighty spiritual and social punishment. A parish priest could face removal from his parish if he neglected his duty in using the ‘utmost zeal’ in ending ‘such unseemly behaviour’ (Ó Súilleabháin, 1967, pp. 137-140). Delay (2019) proffers that civility, solemnity, uniformity, discipline, and reverence were the goals of the new Irish Catholic Church (Delay, 2019, p. 19). With the Church increasingly in control of funerals, including the funeral proceedings being moved to the Church setting instead of the home, opportunities were greatly reduced for keening to be performed by women or for the skill to be transmitted to the younger generations.

With the retreat of the British ruling forces and the emergence of a new Irish Republic in the early twentieth century, the social and economic transformation of Ireland had begun. The depopulation of Ireland as a result of the Famine<sup>16</sup> meant that many landholdings became available and were now being consolidated into small farms owned by what was viewed as a well-behaved class of ‘self-interested’ and ‘nation building’ farmer who was happy to adhere to the ‘new and puritanical morality’ implemented by Catholic Church in return for an improvement of their economic situation (Lloyd, 2013, p. 215). The ‘savage’ and tardy personality that the Irish had been so tarnished with for many centuries was now rejected as primitive and a new construction emerged of a respectable Irish people, especially Irish women, who no longer raucously laughed and revelled nor howled and wailed. The ideal Irish woman was now modelled and constructed.

Since these times of change in the early twentieth century, Ireland’s complex socio-religious history has undergone even further significant transformation. Scholars such as Gladys Ganiel (2016) have documented the shift from traditional Catholic authority throughout the twentieth century which became marked by institutional control and collective trauma to more individualized and experiential forms of spirituality. This is discussed in relation to contemporary imaginings of the keening tradition in Chapter 11.

### [Irish Folklore Commission](#)

While the main reasons for the decline of keening have been outlined above, Mícheál Briody (2007) proffers another layer of reasoning for the further decline of this tradition into the

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<sup>16</sup> After a peak in 1845 of probably 8.3 million inhabitants, Ireland lost a large part of its population. According to the 1851 census, the population shrank to 6.55 million persons, due to what is today termed as the Great Famine in Ireland. For information on population losses, see Nusteling (2009). For a general history of the Famine in Ireland, see Kinealy, et al., (2018)

twentieth century, which he lays very much at the door of the newly formed Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) in 1935. In Briody's extensive research of the IFC, he reports to us that the main direction which the Commission initially took for the collection of Irish traditions and folk practices was influenced by the conservative Catholic and nationalistic mindset of those on the IFC board. This mindset, he suggests, had a bearing on the IFC's approach towards what should be collected, what was deemed to be 'important' Irish traditions, and what should be promoted as part of Ireland's national 'personality'. This attitude, he claims, was reflected in their apathy towards the collection of keening and wake rituals (Briody, 2007, p. 61).

Having gained independence from British rule, 1930's Ireland was in its infancy as a sovereign state and was eager to position itself on the world map. As was the trend in many European countries in this era, the new Irish government promoted its new national identity by drawing on its 'ancient' Celtic/ Gaelic past. Newly elected government members were anxious to establish to the outside world that Ireland's national character was a sophisticated one which was in possession of many 'ancient' traditions in the areas of sports, music, and dance (Briody, 2007, p. 45). In the early decades of the independent Irish state, 'folklore' was seen to have an important role to play in the moulding of that image, and the Irish Folklore Commission's remit was to collect and archive Ireland's 'ancient' traditions (p. 61). Due to the increasing unpopularity of keening amongst the new 'movers and shakers' in the new Irish social and cultural landscape and the centuries of ridicule on the international stage by visitors and anthropologists plus the targeting of the tradition by the Catholic Church, it is not so surprising that the part of Irish culture where passionate (and potentially dangerous) women, who wailed, thrashed and shouted their particular colour of grievance and dissent, were pushed to the rear in the collection of Irish cultural artifacts. New Irish culture and traditions were being developed with a kind of a 'cultural amnesia' at play which led to a

forgetting of what were seen as undesirable parts of Ireland's traditions, especially traditions which involved emotional 'heathenish' displays such as keening (Lloyd, 2013).

## Shame

As mentioned above, the practice of lamenting at funerals in Ireland was often portrayed in a negative frame by those who didn't understand the importance of its function or viewed it as suspicious and rousing. It could be argued that its undesirability was furthered by the efforts of the Catholic Church and its 'well-behaved' adherents, and this may well have prevented it from entering the canon of Irish 'traditions' which were being promoted ardently to the rest of world, when Ireland became mostly free of its colonisers. In the search for and promotion of Ireland's 'old and ancient' traditions, those spearheading the new Irish state sought a postcolonial cultural identity which was drawn from popular collections of music, singing, poetry, dancing, storytelling, and sports (Briody, 2007). The image which had been painted of lament of old drunken crones wailing and crying at wakes and its association with a poorer, wilder, pagan past was something easy to leave behind by the new up-and-coming 'respectable' middle classes and for anyone aspiring to be like them. For the promoters of the new respectable Ireland, the image of a wailing old woman at the graveside was not an attractive one

The story of the 'freezing out' of cultural practices such as keening that were considered shameful is a pattern observed worldwide and in Chapter 5, I highlight how this also happened with the Karelian lament tradition in Finland. Wilce (2009) asserts that in the contemporary world, there is much pressure to replace loud lamenting with silent weeping or talking about grief, and this has increasingly displaced lament in many countries. Wilce has found that shame is often associated with lament and that this is often tied into the national pride of emerging nation-states, who are inclined to reject such 'undesirable' traits.

Those who cannot be paraded as model citizens the new nation can be proud of are considered incompatible with national pride and in some cases are considered to be economically harmful. Wilce surmises that this is partly owing to the advent of electronic worldwide platforms. There is a fear of lacking in ‘cultural capital’ and a certain national self-consciousness emerged that has regularized conduct (especially at funerals), and ‘silent weeping’ has become a general marker of respectability (Wilce, 2009). In his fieldwork study on women’s lament in Bangladesh, rather than mourning being a public performative practice as it has been for centuries, public weeping is being transformed more and more today into a private experience.

In the Irish context, it is safe to say that the persistent drive by the Catholic Church and colonial commentators throughout the centuries for quiet contemplative mourning over loud displays of emotion at funerals has rendered an ‘erasure’ of an undesirable social trait in the country in the time of an emergence of the Irish national ideological picture. When linguistic practices are inconsistent with an ideological schema, certain traditions become invisible or are transformed. These are often practices that go unnoticed and can be easily explained away as not being a normal part of the social or cultural life of a society:

So, for example, a social group, or a language, may be imagined as homogeneous, its internal variation disregarded. Because a linguistic ideology is a totalizing vision, elements that do not fit its interpretive structure – that cannot be seen to fit – must either be ignored or be transformed (Gal & Irvine, 1995).

Even though keening was a persistently reported feature of Irish wakes throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and somewhat into the twentieth century, by the mid to

late twentieth century, in tandem with the decline of the house-based wake, it also disappeared as a normal custom in Irish life.<sup>17</sup>

In contemporary Ireland, keening has not been a feature of Irish funerals for almost one hundred years and has mostly been forgotten. Most people under fifty whom I have mentioned it to for instance (including several hundred university students in classes I've taught over the years, when I explain my research topic), profess to have never heard of it. Older people in the 50 plus age group might have heard about keening from elderly relatives and some people that I have discussed it with have a vague memory of it at funerals they attended when they were young.<sup>18</sup> I have found though, that those who do have a vague recollection of the tradition generally have a negative association with it, remembering it as just being some 'awful wailing' by old women.

It is safe to say that amongst the general public today, keening is certainly not recognised as the important social, spiritual, and skilled craft described by many contemporary writers on the subject. If something like 'keening' does make a positive appearance in funerals in contemporary times it is more like how Kevin Toolis (2018) describes his father's wake in the West of Ireland, where he recounts keening in a very positive frame, but it appears to involve more hymn singing and Catholic prayer, than what we know of the improvised keening of the past.

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<sup>17</sup> Except for, as I mentioned in my introduction, the very rare example such as the keening by the people of the Gearagh on the day of the flooding of their river valley homes by the dam waters in 1956.

<sup>18</sup> As mentioned previously, my own octogenarian aunts remember their grandmother sitting at wakes and crying like this at funerals in Cork city that they would have attended as young girls in the 1930's, 40's and 50's.

## Dangerous voices

The examination of keening and lament customs in the wider world has also been illuminated through the lenses of gender, power, and authority. Ní Shíocháin (2018) argues that those who attempt to control ‘emotional’ behaviours and sounds made by women who used oral forms of poetry and song are driven by a fear of the ‘ecstatic authority’, that they possessed (Ní Shíocháin, 2018, p. 21). As mentioned earlier, in the heyday of lament in Ireland, lamenting women had a good deal of compositional freedom in the construction of their laments, and those women are said to have held a certain amount of power and influence in the communities they operated within, and this seems to be the same situation around the world.

Ní Shíocháin (2018) has described the power of the ‘improvisational’ element of the manner of composition of lament. Ní Shíocháin argues that reactionary and emotive ideas which circulate in a ritual which is communally performed without censure (such as in the performance of lament and other forms of improvised oral poetry) have the potential to disrupt. She asserts that those who have the mastery of improvised song forms in a ritual setting (such as lamenters at a wake) can quickly change their rhetoric to flow with or against the winds of popular thought and can even instigate the flow of anti-establishment ideas. Ní Shíocháin argues that those who possess the mastery of lament composition and performance can also be described as ‘masters of social space’ (Ní Shíocháin, 2018, p. 19), and can have a powerful effect on the listener. Wilce suggests that passionate public displays observed in lament traditions have generally been associated with danger, and potentially as being a threat to the social status quo and patriarchal ideologies. He proposes that linking lament with ‘wild’ emotion purposefully concealed its true character and function as a ‘politically charged act of a social agent’ (Wilce, 2009, p. 48).

Warhaft (1992) outlines the many attempts throughout many centuries in numerous cultures around the world to curb, control or obliterate lament performance. Martins (1983) claims that in Portuguese society, the de-ritualization of mourning practices there since the mid-twentieth century was in no small way affected by changes in the Catholic liturgy<sup>19</sup> and the incessant Church criticism of ‘peasant’ customs as ‘superstitious’ and ‘backward’. In the Irish case, this is certainly attested by (Ní Shíocháin, 2018) who explains how Irish women who unleashed their dissenting voices through their oral forms of song and poetry, particularly, were almost certainly regarded by some as agitators and as a threat to social order. Ní Shíocháin in fact contends that the flavour of Irish nationalism which was beginning to be stirred by the ‘men of writing’ in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, first found its roots in the grievances and dissenting voices found in the orally-transmitted discourses of women in the small villages and towns of Ireland. I attended a book launch of Ní Shíocháin’s publication *‘Singing Ideas: performance politics and oral poetry’* in 2018 in my early days of researching this topic and it was interesting to note her comments around this subject. I wrote in my research diary at the time:

By the singing of ideas by a woman of no letters, a different story is told about how a society is shaped than the official story written about the development of the anti colonial movement

The shutting down of the keening tradition by the rationalizing ideologies of colonial and Church powers in Ireland was also effectively a shutting down of the flow of women’s ideas and their dissenting voices (Ní Shíocháin, 2018). In an interview, Dr Tríona Ní Shíocháin informed me that keens were ‘performed ideas’, and that keening was a ‘sacred

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, changing the name of the sacrament of ‘Extreme Unction’ to ‘Unction of the Sick’ (Holst-Warhaft, 1992, p. 9)

site of subversion, it stirred up catharsis' (Interview February 2018). This sort of crowd-rousing was regarded by some researchers and theorists in the social and behavioural sciences, as well as in the humanities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as concerning. Gustave Le Bon (1895), and later William McDougall (1920) argued that the 'group mind' and emotional behaviours of people gathering in crowds undermined rational thought and was regarded by Le Bon as contagious, like a disease (von Scheve & Salmela, 2014, p. xiv).

### Lamenting the Loss of Lament

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, discourse around the ritual of keening in Ireland both in the past and the present has had a restorative theme running through it. One of the reported functions of keening in the past was to help the community to reconcile and renew itself and to allow a space for people to grieve after the loss of people from their communities during wars, emigration and other partings. The restorative element of keening was a point of interest for those such as sociologist of religion (and church minister in the UK) Roger Grainger (1998) who proposed that the Irish wake and in particular the ritual of keening within it, held all the attributes of a very useful therapeutic tool for the relief of depression that he associated with not being able to grieve properly in the modern world. Grainger had personally witnessed this for many years while tending to the sick and dying in hospitals and their grieving families. In Grainger's experience with bereaved people, he believed that anything which impedes the course of a bereaved persons grief work can only delay his or her restoration to a re-ordered role in life. This delay in his opinion, is caused by the fact that death and the attempt to cope with it and other traumas, is today the concern of specialists, doctors, clinicians, counsellors who administer advice and medication which 'solve' our inability to cope with trauma. He believed that grieving would be much better endured if

people learned to keen for their dead like they used to do in the Irish countryside, as he had witnessed himself on his regular visits to Ireland (Grainger, 1998, p. 140).<sup>20</sup>

The hospitalisation and the medicalisation of the dying process has meant that a ‘social invisibility of death’ has become more prevalent (Martins, 1983). In modern Greece, where women’s voices can still be heard in lamentation at some funerals, the tradition is increasingly under threat of such modernising influences. Holst-Warhaft (1992) is of the opinion that in the increasing absence of laments at Greek funerals there is a ‘loss of a language with which to speak of death’, thus leaving no structured or emotional way for people to respond to it (Holst-Warhaft, 1992, p. 10). Lament is an ‘expression of the inexpressible pain and separation of death’ and since it has been taken from women and placed in the mouths of institutional and public figures instead, the discourse about death in modern Greece has become as ‘clichéd and impoverished’ as that in ‘Western’<sup>21</sup> societies (p. 39).

In contemporary Ireland, and in a similar pattern to the fate of lament traditions in many other countries around the world (Wilce, 2009), keening declined during the twentieth century to a point where it virtually disappeared from the funerary proceeding, and ritual keening does not feature at all in most modern Irish funerals.<sup>22</sup> While there might still be some fashion of home based ‘wake’ held when someone dies, particularly in the rural areas, Irish funerals are very different in nature today to the wakes of old as described by Ó Súilleabháin (1967), with solemn Catholic prayer, the priest and the Church rituals still playing very much a central role.

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<sup>20</sup> Although likely witnessed in a more contemporary form as mentioned in the Toolis example above

<sup>21</sup> Holst-Warhaft’s own terminology.

<sup>22</sup> Anecdotally, I have heard that something like keening happens at Irish Traveller funerals, but to my knowledge, no research has been conducted on the funerary practices of Irish Traveller communities.

The funeral home and the church have become the main locations for the Irish funeral proceedings in contemporary Ireland. The priestly disapproval of keening was encountered as recently as 1984, when for example, at the funeral of greatly admired traditional Irish singer Joe Heaney in County Galway, the singer Máire Davitt was refused permission by the priest to sing a lament in the church, unless it was one that he regarded as having a sacred theme (Porter, 2013, p. 18).

In the majority of funerals happening in Ireland today, once the religious proceedings have finished (funeral mass and burial), friends and family are usually invited move to a pub or a restaurant where the unofficial ‘afters’ of the funeral begin. This can be in the form of soup and sandwiches in a pub or in more and more cases today, a big dinner is laid on for funeral guests at a hotel or restaurant (almost like a wedding feast). Depending on the location and the people involved, there might be a long ‘session’ in the pub with a ‘sing song’ started up and perhaps even a band booked to play music. Irish funerals do have a reputation for lasting quite a long time and can still be a bit on the raucous side, but they are very different from what we know of wakes of olden days.

Eng and Kazanian posit that once we start asking ‘what is lost?’, the question invariably slips into ‘what remains?’ because we can only know what is lost by examining what remains and how information about the lost thing is articulated and produced by those who mourn it. They suggest that looking back on what may be lost can generate an unhelpful ‘politics of mourning’ that potentially ‘might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary’ (Eng & Kazanjian, 2013, p. 3). They posit that speaking of lost culture is better handled if aligned with the Freudian concept of ‘melancholia’, which they believe allows for movement and a better understanding of the loss.

Whilst most might consider an association with melancholia as ‘pathological’, Eng and Kazanian suggest that viewing something considered lost through the lens of melancholia offers those who mourn the lost thing (in this case keening), the ability to creatively remember in a way that ‘generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future (Eng & Kazanjian, 2013, p. 4). They suggest that ‘melancholia’s persistent struggle with its lost objects [is] not simply a ‘grasping’ and ‘holding’ on to a fixed notion of the past but rather a continuous engagement with loss and its remains’ (p. 5), and this can represent a creative, more positive process which can rewrite the past, as well as reimagining the future and gaining new perspectives and understandings of what is deemed to be ‘lost’.

Hobsbawm (1983) argues that the assumption that new traditions simply took over from older more undesirable or unviable ones is too simplistic. Rituals and traditions no longer wanted or required were often very quickly subsumed when there were rapid changes in society. The old social patterns for which the traditions existed were destroyed or left behind because they were not applicable or did not fit into the new picture of society or did not serve its needs anymore. He warns that we cannot assume that older forms of community and authority and the traditions around them were so unadaptable that they very quickly became unviable. Instead, he believes that the process of adaptation is often underestimated. It has been shown that traditions in oral cultures have easily morphed and adapted to new situations (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 5). Traditions such as lament, rather than simply disappearing, adapted and changed form. Porter (2013), for example, suggests that keening could have transformed into ‘sorrowful songs’ which could be respectably sung in, for instance, a social situation like a pub after a funeral or in other social gathering as long as they were no longer the ‘manic’ and unacceptable displays of ‘uncivilised’ behaviour of old.

Laments in the twentieth century are mostly found in performed song form, almost hymn-like with religious themes<sup>23</sup>, and of course the most famous lament of them all, '*Caoine for Art O' Laoighre*',<sup>24</sup> was adopted by the Irish literary world and is now lauded as one of Ireland's most revered examples of very 'respectable' classic poetry. Keening that appears today as a performance is generally sung in a musical register rather than in a non-musical crying 'magical' register as it was reported in the past. According to Ó Madagáin (1982), today's laments are not in any way reminiscent of what we know of the skilfulness of the historic keening and the keening women.

There are many mentions of keening, *caoineadh*, *caoine*, *bean caointe*, etc., in the written archival collections of the Irish Folklore Commission during the twentieth century and occasional mentions in the academic journals such as *Béalóideas* associated with it. There are, however, no recordings taken by the IFC of any kind of keening in situ at the graveside, even though it was still in practice (in a more acceptable form) in a few places in the early twentieth century, especially in rural areas. Whilst there are also many audio recordings of popular Irish tunes and songs from that era that were archived by the IFC collectors, here are only three sound recordings in existence (that we are aware of) of woman singing a keen and these were recorded (not in situ) by two American ethnomusicologists.<sup>25</sup> Any recordings which were made of keens in this period are considered by Ó'Madagáin (1982) as poor examples of the richness of the original form. We must also note that there

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<sup>23</sup> Such as singer Iarla Ó Lionáird who sings a religious-themed '*Caoinedh na d'TriMhuire*' and Sinead O' Connor and several other artists who have covered a contemporary version of an anonymous 17th century poem called 'I am Stretched on your Grave'.

<sup>24</sup> A particularly nice rendition of this poem which I like, and which has been merged with some experimental sound in an award-winning film at the Houston International Film Festival 2018 was created by photographer and film producer Stephen Bean at University College Cork and was filmed at the final burial place of Art O' Laoighre, Kilcrea Friary in County Cork.

<sup>25</sup> A keen recorded by Alan Lomax in Donegal in 1951 'Keen for a dead child' found in Lomax Digital Archive ([www.culturalequity.org](http://www.culturalequity.org)) and two recordings collected by Sidney Robertson Cowell in the Aran Islands in 1955 and 1956 as 'Songs of Aran' found in Smithsonian Folkways Recordings ([www.si.edu](http://www.si.edu))

likely would have been reluctance by women themselves to keen outside of the death ritual context for fear of bringing bad luck (Ó Madagáin, 1982) which may have also hampered efforts to record keens in-situ.

There are some musically notated examples published in Ó'Madagáin (1982), and while they were useful to get a sense of the tuning of laments, I found it impossible to understand how one can notate an extremely discordant crying or wailing sound on sheet music. In her *"Women Cry With Words: Symbolization of Affect in the Karelian Lament"* (1990), Elizabeth Tolbert tells us that in her study of Karelian lament, it is evident that the emotional force of Karelian laments lies in their melodic contour and frequency modulation, which she suggests can demonstrate the shape and sound of the cry and the physical act of weeping (Tolbert, 1990). Tolbert's observations are interesting especially in how she describes the 'shape' of a sigh in musical terms and her detailed consideration of precisely how lamenters use sound to express emotional intensity and indicate points of transcendental crossover. However, while notated versions that we have of Irish lament do indeed convey a mournful tune when played, notes on staff lines by themselves cannot fully represent a cry that erupts from deep within a body. To attempt to notate a deep mournful cry, sigh or wail or indeed a screech, is to misunderstand its essence. Keening is not a fixed composition but a living, breathing act of expression which in its delivery has the power to open up that all important portal to the 'other world', and to instigate the spiritual connection and conversation with the ancestors, which I discuss further in Chapter 11.

While notated examples such as those in Ó Madagáin (1982) may offer a glimpse into the framework and certain tunings, they fall short of capturing the raw, deeply personal discordant and spiritual nature of a wail. Each lament was shaped by the keener's dialect, voice, breath, and emotional state, that notation cannot adequately capture. There is scant evidence in the notated examples of the diversity of tunes used from various parts of the

country and of the styles, formats and devices which would have been employed by the many individual lament practitioners.

The lack of recordings of keens, however, could also have been the result of financial and technical difficulties that beset the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) in the early years of its existence, which restricted the ability of folklore collectors to make audio recordings of keens in situ (Briody, 2007). Up until 1969 the collectors, for the best part of the thirty years of the IFC's existence, often had no proper recording apparatus<sup>26</sup> to make permanent sound recordings. All that was available to them was the basic Ediphone recording device and the rolls on which audio recordings were made were often reused several times. Because of the shortage of the Ediphone 'rolls' that the recordings were etched onto, once the day's collected material was transcribed by the collector, they often cleaned the roll and recorded over the material. In addition, with the Ediphone recorder being heavy and cumbersome, it was difficult if not impossible for collectors to move around easily and catch a funeral, for instance

Briody (2007) tells us also that at this time, it was felt that there was an 'urgent' need to collect stories of Ireland's past, the folktales and myths and lore, rather than recording other kinds of living traditions. This, Briody posits, was possibly boosted by influence from prominent Swedish and Finnish folklore collectors who held a strong belief that old Irish myths and legends could shed a light on Norse/Icelandic literature (p. 65). Where the Commission's chairman and his colleagues can be faulted in the story of the loss of the keening tradition, is not so much because they were concentrated on the other streams of

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<sup>26</sup> Though there was one home-made recorder in operation from 1949 which produced 5,320 12-inch discs, 220 of those coming under the heading of poetic/song items (Briody, 2007, p. 344, ref.115).

tradition, but in doing so they would appear, for the most part, to have ‘failed to recognise the dynamism and continuity of the tradition’ (Briody, 2007, p. 445).

Briody also draws attention to the fact that no women were employed by the IFC during the thirty-five years of its existence, either as collectors or on its board, and this could possibly be a factor in the dearth of ‘women’s folklore’ collected. Although he gives credence to the fact that it was a patriarchal world at the time, he argues that this and the other obstacles mentioned above, definitely contributed to the lack of recordings available today of an actual in-situ keening. It is important to note here that when folklorists were collecting information about keening in Ireland during the early twentieth century, the tradition had already started to wane, and according to Ó’Madagáin (1982), the quality of the practice had deteriorated, so it could be argued that even if we had recordings from that period, they would not have been representative of the older tradition.

Records reflect that the subject of the keening ritual had been a curiosity to outsiders for centuries up to the late nineteenth century and, as stated previously, was generally written about negatively. While its regular practice as a funerary ritual may have fallen off during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because of some or all the aforementioned factors, more recently there has been much interest in keening and many have rued its loss as a cultural tradition. After the publication of Sean Ó Súilleabháin’s *Irish Wake Amusements* in 1967,<sup>27</sup> which was a highly detailed account of wake practices in Ireland through the centuries up until the mid-1900s, scholarly interest was piqued (especially in the areas of music and folklore) and academic publications began to appear with many investigations into the form and function of keening and its *raison d’être* debated and discussed. The

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<sup>27</sup> Ó Súilleabháin (1967) is the seminal publication which almost all English-language based publications that I have read, use as a major source. There are many other publications, however, that also quote many of the Irish-language publications and the Irish Folklore Commission collections as source material.

publications by Bourke (1988), Briody (2007), Lysaght (1997), Ó Laoire (2005), Ó Madagáin (1982), appear to be the most widely consulted English-language publications and there are several Irish-language publications also available. The Irish Folklore Commission archives are also a very valuable source of information for researchers seeking written information about keening practices.

In conclusion, despite its decline, keening has not been entirely forgotten. Scholarly interest in the practice has grown, with researchers exploring its historical significance and cultural functions. Understanding the history of keening provides valuable insights into the broader processes of cultural change and the ways in which traditions and elements of tradition are preserved, transformed, or lost over time. The next chapter deals with the complexities of such transformations of tradition and ritual change.

## Chapter 4: Ritual and Reinvention

The formal study of ritual is a recent phenomenon in human history. From the earliest records available concerning the activities of human beings in the world, it seems that those activities which we describe today as ‘rituals’ were a common feature of life. However, it is only since the late nineteenth century that these activities have been presented as ‘data’ in theoretical speculation about the origin of religions and the structures of early and contemporary societies (Bell, 1997, p. 1). The phenomenon of ritual has become the exemplar employed by many scholars to explain how a wide variety of relationship roles and power dynamics are played out, both inside and outside of official forms of religion. The gestures, words, and general communications between ritual actors and beings of the ‘otherworld’, are said to offer those actors (and others in their wider society) insights about their place in a larger order of things (Bell 1997, p. xi).

The theoretical study of ritual began alongside the development of anthropological methodologies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a ‘who’s who’ line up of important theorists in that time-period one finds the ‘big names’ such as James George Frazer, William Robertson Smith, Edward Tylor, Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Arnold van Gennep, Sigmund Freud, Bronisław Malinowski, Max Gluckman and Clifford Geertz. However, it was in the late 1960’s that many of the influential theoretical approaches in the study of ritual emerged in anthropological publications, bearing the names of a further raft of what have become influential authorities on this topic, such as Mary Douglas, Thomas Huxley, Edith and Victor Turner, Edmund Leach, Erving Goffman, and Roy Rappaport, to name but a few<sup>28</sup>. It has been suggested that the motivation for such a proliferation of

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<sup>28</sup> See the extensive volume by Kreinath, et al., (2007) which outlines the work of the most important theorists in the study of ritual throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

publications particularly in these years was possibly due to the English translation in 1960 of Arnold Van Gennep's seminal *Les rites de passage* (*The Rites of Passage*), which was originally published in 1909 (Stausberg, 2007, p. viii). The decades that followed yielded an abundance of publications on the topic of ritual from a variety of disciplines and by the late twentieth century many distinct schools of thought had emerged in this field of research. Many analyses, interpretations, and debates on the origins of religious ritual were developed, with much focus on the subject of the potential of ritual to explain the source point of religion and culture.

One difficulty with the sheer volume of data that emerged on the topic during this period is that along with this came contradictions and confusion about the purpose of ritual in people's lives. One example of this confusion of perspectives is demonstrated by Bell (1997) where she highlights how during the twentieth century several different and sometimes contradictory interpretations and explanations had emerged about the functions and *raison d'être* of the Babylonian new year ritual known as the 'Akitu'. Bell argues that in this ongoing scenario in the study of ritual it became difficult to ascertain what reliable 'facts' can ever really be derived from the data collected by researchers (Bell, 1997, p. 20). However, it is reasonable to argue that over the time period of a century or two, cultures of writing and data collection methods were bound to be also in flux, so the fact that several different interpretations about one festival were circulating should not be so surprising (Tsang, 2021).

In 2007 a rigorously researched volume appeared, which aimed at condensing past theoretical works on this topic in order to help researchers to more easily navigate the breadth of scholarship published from 1966 to 2005. This extensive volume offers a useful annotated bibliography of a selected 442 primary sources, as well as numerous secondary sources, dealing with the topic of ritual studies laid out in an accessible style and spanning several disciplinary fields (Kreinath, et al., 2007). This volume of work demonstrates the diversity

of methodological frameworks within which ritual has been explored and analysed, giving credence to the kind of thinking espoused by Deleuze & Guattari (1987), that an in-depth study of any academic subject is best compared to being like a flower, with the investigation of that subject imagined as a spreading disorganised ‘rhizomatic’ root system of thought beneath the surface.

Deleuze & Guattari’s analogy is representative of their general critique of textual forms of analyses by academics, who they claim inadequately represent the life-worlds of others (especially oral societies). They are not alone in this critique, as similar concerns have been expressed by others. When discussing the long practice of writing about oral societies, Goody (1977) asserted that history is too much ‘tied to the use of documentary material and tied to literate cultures’ (Goody, 1977, p. 14). Deleuze & Guattari (1987) criticized the ‘schematic systems of order’ fostered by literacy and writing as a medium to present knowledge about the world and they bemoan its dominance in the production of the definitive image of the world. As they say, ‘the book remains the image of the world [...] what a vapid idea’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 6).

This is a common critique of academic representation of oral culture and is still a subject debated today in a variety of disciplines. For instance, Triona Ní Shíocháin (2018), in her work on Irish oral song and poetry forms finds that ‘text is too narrow’ for the analysis of these oral traditions. She is critical of the way they have been historically represented through literacy; she furthermore critiques the aligned academic practice of casting the ‘cold gaze’ over the object of study. Ní Shíocháin declares that this restrictive analysis of oral traditions is typical of the way that the western world ‘tells itself about itself’ (Ní Shíocháin, 2018, p. 6).

When scholars of the study of religions have attempted to explain order, coherency and meaning in the world through the analysis of ritual, they face the challenge of being bound by the constraints of academic norms and expectations, which for the most part are expressed in written formats. In addition, they can be swayed by their own motivations, biases and assumptions, as well as attempting to make sense of things that they observe, that they may not understand (Bell, 1997). Researchers of ritual may also be influenced by a certain nostalgic looking backwards whereby they ‘rue the loss of enchantment’ (p. xi). It didn’t help matters that these oral traditions were often regarded as what Foucault describes as ‘disqualified knowledge’ (quoted in Ní Shíocháin, 2018, p. 6). According to Bell (1997), these challenges demonstrate that the study of ritual is a study of relationships between ‘us’ and our representation of some mysterious ‘other’, where written and visual representations often typify a particular viewpoint and that this does not bode well for the production of reliable ‘data’. In fact, she declares that the research findings on that ‘other’ often reveal more about the inadequacies of the observer than anything it might reveal about those they observe (Bell, 1997, p. ix). Bell also tells us that the term ‘ritual’ itself is problematic because it has been ‘pressed into service’ largely by Europeans and Americans, and ‘built up from samples of ethnographic descriptions and the elevation of many untested assumptions’ (Bell, 1997, p. 21).

Considered equally as problematic as the written accounts of ritual actions and functions in society is the rigidity which can also be contained in photographic and video presentations of ritual practices, which often accompany those textual accounts. Photographs and videos, according to Coleman and Eade (2004) lend themselves most easily to the ‘gaze of the analyst’, and to the examination of ‘relatively fixed rather than fluid physical and social processes’ (Coleman & Eade, 2004, p. 2). They argue that accounts of any given situation or group action elucidated in pictorial representation, even when accompanied by textual

explanations, cannot tell the whole story either. As an example, we can consider one of the pictorial accounts presented by Victor and Edith Turner (1978), which captures penitential pilgrims at the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico kneeling and praying at the shrine at the final destination on their pilgrimage. What is not evident from these pictures is that a central part of the pilgrimage is a ritual which involves the arduous and painful task of pilgrims crawling on their knees to get to the shrine, which can be from a distance of up to one mile away. Coleman and Eade (2004) proffer that even with the addition of the photographic material, the Turner's anthropological analysis of this pilgrimage misses a crucial element of penitential 'journeying', which is a very important transformational process for the pilgrim. Coleman and Eade suggest that rituals associated with pilgrimage could be more holistically represented through the examination of what happens in the 'movement', the journeying, and the social life of a pilgrimage, rather than the anthropological habit of representing ritual as something fixed at the end point.

The next stage of the academic process is the publication of research findings, for use as reference and as a contribution to the knowledge base of the discipline. However, the consequence of this progression has been that often, by a process of osmosis, the written version of events – often the first study of a given ritual type or cultural context – can end up becoming the 'canonical' entity and in many cases can become the definitive account of the way a ritual or tradition has 'always' been done (Bell, 1997, p. 169). Cohn (1987) gives us one example of the consequences of this process, pointing to India in the eighteenth century where 'the very embodiment of an authentic India' came about because those in power decided that Indian civilization was founded on a particular set of Sanskrit texts. As a result, 'what had been fluid, complex and even unstructured, became fixed, objective and tangible' (Cohn, 1987, p. 46). A further consequence of textual accounts of rituals becoming 'normative' practice is that the ritual becomes regarded as something which needs to be

protected and preserved from any change or adjustment. This is problematic for improvised and orally transmitted rituals which tend to change with every performance, depending on the audience and the situation. In this scenario, there is a clear need for rituals to be fluid and to make allowances for changing social systems, especially in unstable conditions, such as in times of societal upheaval.

This problem was highlighted by Geertz (1957), where the funeral of a young Javanese man deteriorated into disaster because of a disparity around what the cultural norms and expectations were with regards to funeral rituals, for the family and other mourners, set against what was allowed by the dominant politico-religious and social environment in which they found themselves (Geertz, 1957, pp. 41-47). Much of the research conducted on the topic of ritual – as well as the findings and analytical models which emerge as a result – is developed from observation undertaken over relatively short periods, and at set points in time. Realistically, in such complicated situations as exemplified above, unless those studies are longitudinal, they are unlikely to be able to reliably chart any changes made to ritual practices after the completion of a study. When the nuances of a ritual might need to be modified for practical reasons, binding directives which originate from textual sources often serve to create confusion and controversy.

As much as changes in ritual practices might happen over time, we must also be cognisant that changes can occur in academic practice (Cohn, 1987, p. 43). Counter to the viewpoint that textual accounts are not useful for charting changes in ritual practices which span the generations and centuries, Tsang (2021) maintains that what has been ignored in this whole orality vs literacy debate is the value of recent attention in studies of ritual to exploring how ‘material’ objects, such as handwritten texts found in personal notebooks for instance, are very effective in charting change within ritual practices. This is because the written notes will often record (in extra notes made inside margins and such like), how rituals have been

adapted to changing scenarios. Tsang declares that these literal ‘material objects’ are far from presenting rituals as somehow fixed and unchangeable just because they are in written form and he believes that his discovery of such texts, in Afro-Cuban religious communities for instance, ‘yields new insight into the relationship between ritual, liturgy, and literature’ (Tsang, 2021, p. 230). This burgeoning field of research therefore, albeit in literary form, is very important for the study of ritual and is particularly useful in research conducted with oral or endangered cultures.

### Ritual Adaptations

The question of whether rituals should be adapted to move with the times has become a controversial topic in the past few decades both in academic circles and in cultural groups. Some ritual practices – and the traditions that have grown around them – are often presented as timeless, time-honoured, and ‘ancient’ with the implication that they have been unchanged for centuries. However, traditions have a long history of evolving over time, and informally in most cases ‘it is necessary to dismantle one commonly held presumption about rituals: that tradition and repetition are essential for any authentic definition of ritual’ (Anderson & Foley, 1998, p. 128).

It is difficult to pinpoint the origin of a tradition, and it is especially difficult to identify which parts have been reinvented, added to or changed, especially the orally transmitted traditions such as the topic of this thesis, ‘lament’, because they were not recorded for much of their existence (Hobsbawn, 1983, p. 4). There is also an assumption by those who could be referred to as the ‘protectors’ of tradition (and protectors of the rituals bound up with those traditions such as lament) that if they are reinvented or reimagined then they cannot possibly work or be as effective as rituals deemed much older and more ‘authentic’. Changes in ritual practice then are often rejected and feared because of worries about ‘dilution’ of culture, as well as change being considered as a threat and an undermining of the important roles given

to community, custom, and consensus (Bell 1997, p. 223). Additionally, Bell suggests that there is often resistance to making changes to existing rituals, and to forming new customs and traditions because people do not want to accept the possibility that everything is constructed and that the narratives, traditions and customs which grow up around their ritual lives are simply 'a collusive drama that all must be in on' (Bell, 1997, p. 224). She maintains that people like ritual to remain mysterious so that they almost fool themselves into thinking it existed like that forever.

If people consider that rituals can be invented and reinvented and that they are perhaps simply products of the imagination, they are conceding that everything in life might be constructed and as Myerhoff points out, 'we may recognize all our most precious understandings, the precepts we live by, as mere desperate wishes and dreams' (Myerhoff in Bell, 1997, p. 224). For many though, considering that everything is constructed is not so problematic and can in fact allow them the freedom to construct (or reconstruct) meaningful and modern rituals for specific purposes which they feel are not catered for by the religious institutions. Studies have shown that it is important for the modern individual 'seekers' of ritual, and those reinventing rituals, or inventing new ones, to have creative freedom to do this so that there can still be meaning and solemnity at important transitional occasions, and that it is not solely the preserve of religious institutions (Grimes 2000; Bell, 1997).

It is often argued by anthropologists and other social scientists that the effect of socially or politically dependent changes, which can happen in rituals over time, leaves cultural knowledge and experience in a 'state of incessant instability and disorder' and exposed to the random will of individuals (Severi, 2002). Severi (2002) asserts that the Turnerian notion that ritual is an unambiguous expression of a common cultural background is too rigid and does not take account of natural variations in people's memories and experiences (Severi, 2002, p. 27). He proffers that within rituals and rites there is more often than not the existence of a

loose structure, a form or a pattern of narratives or plot of some kind, which is a ‘device’ that holds the essence of the cultural memory together (p. 23). Grimes (2000) admits that in the past he had some doubts about whether reinvented rituals or borrowed ones would work or that it was appropriate, but he has in hindsight shifted his thinking claiming that ‘rites are not givens; they are hand-me-downs, quilts we continue to patch’ (Grimes, 2000, p. 12). Grimes stresses that reinventions of rituals are not ‘poor duplicates’ because even the most radical of reinventions are not completely original, nor are they creations from nothing, but are dependent on what is remembered about those older rituals. He contends that the reinvented forms will always hold an essence of the originals (Grimes, 2000, pp. 3,4), ‘even if our desire is to create new rites of passage, we do so with the materials at hand, with the stuff of our cultures and traditions’ (Grimes, 2000, p. 12).

Severi (2002) suggests that it is reasonable to assume that while a ritual might endure because of memory and loose formulaic devices, there is no guarantee that everyone involved in a ritual practice or performance understands its function or interprets its meaning in the same way. He believes that it is ‘much more realistic to describe ritual as a context that can involve a range of more fragmented, divided and historically self-conscious social situations’ (Severi, 2002, p. 27). Citing an example offered by Humphrey and Laidlaw (1995), who point to the description given by the Trinidadian-born British writer of works of fiction and nonfiction in English, V. H. Naipaul, of his return to Trinidad to attend a ‘Hindu’ funeral rite for his sister, where he describes witnessing a ‘plurality of social experiences’ and ‘fragmented and overlapping cultural and ethnic identities’ present. Even though this might have led to different and even contradictory understandings of the ritual, what was more important in this example for the participants is that they were united in its performance and there was a conscious desire to perform it together, albeit recovered/accessed in different ways (Humphrey and Laidlaw in Severi, 2002, p. 27).

In the contemporary academic realm, it has been much argued that all traditions were probably reinventions at some point (Grimes, 2000, p. 5). An example of how so-called ‘ancient’ traditions can be invented and reinvented can be observed in the ‘Gothic’ style rebuilds of the British Parliament in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In deliberately inserting a new building and connecting it to an imaginary Gothic past, this ensured that in the modern rebuild there was a referent to something considered more ‘fixed’ and older which could be said to be a tactic employed in order to establish an impression of stability and authenticity (Hobsbawm, 1983). However, even when the validation of the ‘authenticity’ of a tradition is cemented with a link to a historic past, that historical referent is often something which itself has been borrowed from something even older, and so the cycle keeps recurring.

In another example of how rituals are invented, Bell (1997) highlights how in the early twentieth century, men’s fraternal organizations in America such as the Odd Fellows and Freemasons, offered prizes to members for the ‘best and most perfect ritual’, partly because there was a fear that the societies were dwindling and the purpose of offering the prize for these new rituals was to retain members and attract new ones. Bell also suggests that ‘New Age’ movements are renowned for devising new communal rites which express their perspectives on nature, and to reinforce their belief systems and their group ideals (Bell, 1997, p. 225). In Ireland during the mid to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the builders of the new Irish nation were attempting to separate from all things colonial, many of what now have become staple Irish traditions, and which have been proclaimed as having connections to ancient times, have been revealed as fancies of an imagined past cultivated by Anglo-Irish and British romanticist writers who are said to have influenced the ‘Irish Renaissance’ (Anderson 1991; Howes, 2006, p. 59; Kilberd, 1995, p. 1; Wright, 2014, pp.ix-1). The story of St. Patrick, for example, and all that he represents, is the quintessential symbol of both religious and secular ‘Irishness’. This mythicised figure has grown to become

a potent representation of Irish identity, recognised all over the world; however, very little factual evidence exists about the saint. So much of the popular narrative around this significant figure is in fact a melding of the mythical and the religious (Butler, 2012), and in some cases the story is taught in Catholic schools as if it is factual. Inglis (2008) tells us that ‘in some respects, Irish culture is similar to Irish fauna. There are native elements, but there have always been elements that have been imported or blown in from abroad’ (Inglis, 2008, p. 8), a claim we can make about all cultures.

### Tradition is Modern

Anttonen (2005) tells us that when we study social practices that are regarded as tradition, ‘we must reflect on what we mean by tradition’ and when we examine the meaning behind the practices within that tradition, need to be cognisant of who is seeking meaning, or who the tradition is meaningful for. What and who identifies something as a ‘tradition’? Anttonen points to the obvious example of one answer to this question which is ‘classic nationalism and the use of traditions to legitimate the consolidation of territorial and administrative control’ (Anttonen, 2005, p. 11). More recently, in post-colonial discourses, the torch has been shone on the traditions of indigenous peoples, sometimes as a strategy to give political force to arguments for their rights. In these cases, criteria for what constitutes ‘traditionality’ is hardly ever questioned or doubted. However, scholars working in the area of cultural studies are duty-bound to define, categorize, and evaluate the meaning of ‘culture’, and ‘tradition’.

Anttonen asserts that while tradition is usually connected with ‘cultural continuity’ and ‘historic patterning’ it is intrinsically bound up with its counterpart idea of ‘modernity’. He advises that when we discuss social processes as ‘traditional’ or as long held ‘traditions’ we must note that ‘while modernity, according to the classic tenet, destroys tradition, it – epistemologically speaking – creates tradition and makes tradition a modern product

(Anttonen, 2005, p. 13). He argues that the concept of 'tradition' is inseparable from modern discourse on non-modernity and the continuous social practice of construction and reconstruction and reinterpretations of what is deemed 'culture' and 'tradition'. As outlined above, there are plenty of examples that rituals change and morph over time and while some reject and fear change, others embrace it. An acceptance of ritual as a fluid cultural form brings permission and flexibility in contemporary times for people to make adjustments to rituals to suit their real-world situations and identity narratives.

### Terminology

The terminology around reinventing and reimagining customs and rituals might be useful to briefly explore at this point. According to Grimes (2000), the term 'inventing' is probably more applicable than 'imagining' because while we might be able to imagine how an old cultural form might be useful for modern purposes, the action of turning that imagined idea into something practical can only be achieved through the process of invention. Hobsbawm advises that we also need to think of the term 'tradition' in a different light to 'custom' or 'convention', although they are intricately bound. Hobsbawm suggests that conventions and routines which start out carrying no 'significant ritual or symbolic function' might have the potential to develop into something symbolic and become tradition. He gives the example of the 'convention' of wearing a hard hat for riding being something that makes sense but when it becomes a 'tradition' of wearing a particular kind of hat with a red coat for hunting, for example, then it becomes something much more potent.

The repetitive practice of a custom can be a justification for labelling it as a 'tradition', then after a period of time it further becomes considered as 'invariant', especially, as discussed previously, if the 'rules' about its performance have been committed to written form. However, if a ritual practice begins to wane, for whatever reason, it can evolve into another form and that new form becomes regarded as a 'tradition' in its own right. Consider, for

example, the case of the revival of the Karelian lament tradition in Finland (that I will discuss in Chapters 5 and 6). Although the modern Karelian lament ‘workshop’ model is quite different to how traditional lament may have been performed in the past, it now has a twenty-year-old history of its existence in this new form and has become a new way of doing an old ritual. It is the same but different. Whether we call this activity ritual creativity, ritual invention, ritualizing, ritual making, or ritual revision does not matter as much as recognizing that rites change, that they are also flowing processes, not just rigid structures or momentary events (Grimes, 2000).

### Cultural Flow

When ceremonies are called upon to mark the major life events (for instance funerals, weddings, or in religious life, christenings), they have traditionally happened for the most part in a fashion long prescribed by the embedded religious institutions of each individual country or community. However, today for many people, other major life events such as marriage separations, house moves, grief, stress and sadness are often experienced without much ceremony or ritual because the dominant religious ceremonies of institutions do not cater to this need. The ‘traditional’ religious rituals and ceremonies such as those for weddings and funerals are being rejected by some, and people are instead opting for non-religious ways to mark even those major life events because they want to have control over the event themselves rather than a priest, an undertaker or a marriage consultant telling them what they need or what is expected. Though the traditional rites may be rejected, people still like to have a ‘ceremonial’ component in their new rituals, maybe to reinforce the meaning and solemnity of these important occasions. The older and more ‘authentic’ the ritual or a tradition is deemed to be, the more authority it holds, to add that solemnising component to an important occasion. Therefore, people often seek to emulate parts of rituals that they find appealing either from their own cultural histories or from those of other cultures. In order to

find rituals to suit their needs, they are at pains to identify with something older, often preferably with a history of healing attached to it. For this reason, there is often an interest in traditions and customs that are deemed to have been practiced for centuries, especially those practiced by indigenous communities (Grimes, 2000). The invention (and therefore reasonably applied to reinvention) of traditions to suit contemporary needs is a widespread practice and is usually a strategy employed to establish a continuity with a more 'authentic' and historic past. Though this thinking may justify the reinvention of rituals, 'cultural borrowing' comes with many complications, as there are many who believe that rituals should be performed authentically within the proper setting and context, by those who are deemed to have the authority to do so.

For some, using elements found outside one's own cultural group is considered to be a sully of traditional customs, ritual and ritual materials, and amounts to cultural theft (Anderson & Foley, 1998; Bell, 1997; Browner, 2000; Grimes, 2000; Taylor, 1997). In more strongly worded protestations for some Native American groups, 'war' has even been declared against the 'epidemic' of appropriation by 'non-Indian wannabes, hucksters, cultists, commercial profiteers and self-styled 'New Age shamans' and their followers (Mesteth et al. in Grimes, 2000, p. 143) who are seen to abuse and defile their sacred ceremonies and ritual goods. One example of this is highlighted by Browner (2000), whose particular target for criticism is the experimental musician and feminist activist Pauline Oliveros (1932-2016) who drew from Native American spirituality and cultural icons to create her opera production '*Crow Two*'. This, in Browner's opinion, was an appropriation that violated Native American spiritual and cultural values regarding the use of sacred cultural figures.

Browner informs us that people have tried to defend Oliveros suggesting that the opera was her way of attempting to create a new sort of identity outside of her own identity as a

performer and that it may have been her way of trying to create community and ritual meaning in her work. It has also been suggested that Oliveros's opera highlights the stability of the female against disruptive male forces. However, Browner (of Native American Heritage herself) suggests that even if this was her intention, in using Native American symbolism in an uninformed and insensitive manner like this, she completely misses a key point of male-female relationships in Native American culture. Browner declares that her culture celebrates male-female cooperation and does not have this discordant view of males and females in the way that Oliveros uses it.

While Browner concedes that Oliveros' use of Indian material may have been useful to her to prove a point by way of artistic expression with regards to feminism or to lesbian oppression, she questions whether this gives her the right to use the cultural property of a group which is oppressed by the same dominant society. Browner further accuses Oliveros of not seeming to be in the slightest concerned with engaging in any meaningful way with the group whose symbolism she was appropriating. Further, she accuses Oliveros of not even consulting any of the ethnographic writings of ethnomusicologists and ethnologists who specialized in Native music, but instead turning to the scholarship of Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and her colleague Jerome Rothenburg's anthologies of 'primitive' poetry for her ideas. Browner acknowledges that for people interested in researching Native American culture during this time period, direct contact with native groups was not common, but she points out that had Oliveros made even an effort to properly request use of sacred knowledge (by engaging for instance in a ritual of giving of tobacco to an Elder), her work would have been enriched and would have had a direct connection to Native ceremony (Browner, 2000, p. 260).

Browner also accuses composers of non-indigenous New Age and 'World' music who borrow 'bits and pieces from disparate tribes' of being in serious violation of cultural integrity

and that they take sacred elements of ritual completely out of context (Browner, 2000, p. 248). Further, she asserts that these chronically insulting behaviours are enabled because the people doing it are members of a dominant Euro-American society who practice 'whiteshamanism',<sup>29</sup> re-hashing the cultural property of others into a form that others in that same dominant society applaud as fresh, inspired and 'sacred', and that they ignore the possibility that there might be cultural ownership issues and hurt caused (Browner, 2000).

Hobsbawm (1983) is of the belief that:

The history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 13).

Whilst maintaining that rituals can be sensitively reimagined, Grimes (2000) expresses his disappointment that even after nearly twenty years of criticism by Native American indigenous groups of this sort of damaging practice, the abuse and exploitation of their sacred cultural artifacts still continues without sympathy for the emotional and spiritual damage that it can cause (Grimes, 2000, p. 148). However, he is adamant today, when there are so few rituals which reflect modern life situations, that a process of reimagining and reinventing of those older customs has to happen. His is a view also held by Anderson and Foley (1998) when they tell us that many critical moments in life are often devoid of appropriate ritual

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<sup>29</sup> "'Whiteshamanism' was the outgrowth of a number of complex social and literary trends of the 1960s, in both Euro-American and Native American societies. The impulses behind whiteshamanism include the countercultural movements of the mid-1960s, the rebirth of previously suppressed Native spirituality, and finally, values of the non-Indians who created whiteshamanism and propagated its appropriative methodologies within both academic circles and popular culture. Moreover, although whiteshamanism was generally of Native American inspiration and derivation, it also included aspects of Eastern religions and spirituality. Whiteshamanism was (and still is, in the guise of the "New Age") many things at once: a primitivistic movement in the distinctly American tradition of religious and spiritual renewal, a rejection of mainstream American values, and/or a political statement distancing oneself from perceived values of the dominant society" (Browner, 2000, p. 246).

which they feel is a palpable loss (Anderson & Foley, 1998, pp. x,xi). If a ritual awareness is to be developed in the modern world, there is no choice but to find novel approaches but in a way that do not involve harm to oppressed or marginalised peoples.

Grimes (2000) suggests that what is more important than wasting energy debating whether we should be reinventing our old rituals or taking parts of rituals from other cultures, is concentrating on how we can reimagine them sensitively (p. 5). Taylor (1997) believes that this can be done amicably, with the agreement and cooperation of the groups who feel threatened and says that it is important for everyone to realise that just because you want to do some spiritual cleansing by burning some sage leaves or smudge sticks in your bedroom, it doesn't mean that you think you are, or want to be, a Native Indian. Taylor suggests that if by using a part of a Native American ceremony someone feels a connection to some sort of a spiritual force and to nature, and it helps them feel good, surely it is something to be welcomed and supported (Taylor, 1997). Grimes (2000) further maintains that the process of borrowing from, or the reinventing of, past rituals (both local and cross-cultural) to serve modern contexts does not have to involve 'crass imitation or wholesale importation of other people's rites' or produce as, as Baudrillard feared, 'a world of lost referents' (Baudrillard in Fenigsen & Wilce 2012, p. 115). Ritual, according to Grimes (2000), is a crucial necessity in a world where our ties to religious institutions weaken our awareness of ritual activity.

However, whilst there is recognition that there needs to be a way for humans to navigate modern life transitions by reinventing and reimagining old traditions or borrowing from those of other cultures, a note of caution is warned by Grimes, particularly when it comes to 'initiation' rites because 'the project of reinventing initiation thrusts us into a 'snake's nest' of ethical issues, making it the most difficult of the passages to responsibly reinvent' (Grimes, 2000, p. 143). Grimes tells us that initiation rites are the most borrowed ritual goods and particularly refers to those rites of some Native American indigenous

movements who have issued declarations against the use of sacred ceremonial pipes and quasi-Indian forms of ritual ceremonies such as ‘vision quests’<sup>30</sup> and ‘sweat lodges’<sup>31</sup> in questionable and hurtful ways and decreeing them as ‘direct attack and theft’ (Grimes, 2000, p. 147). He stresses that whilst some events such as ‘Bat Mitzvah’<sup>32</sup> or ‘Quinceañeras’<sup>33</sup> celebrate life transitions in a ‘party’ environment, there are others (particularly some ceremonies used for boys) which can involve the ceremonial ‘dismantling’ of an identity and the reconstruction of a new one’ (Grimes, 2000, pp. 143, 144). Grimes goes on to delve extensively into the ethical, moral and legal issues that surround certain rites, voicing his particular concern over the use of initiation rituals (either traditional or invented), which involve inflicting pain on children and adolescents; he also discusses the challenges which abound around power and abuse which are part of certain rituals in the past and some that still happen today, which in his view can be dark and dangerous.

Grimes also expresses his nervousness at the recent emergence of ‘alternative ritual entrepreneurship’ and the ease with which some unregulated ‘specialists’ claim ritual competence in many traditions. He cites as an example a ritual practitioner in America who claims that she can perform rituals which include parts of ceremonies from all faiths or none, including Yoruba animal sacrifice if required (Grimes, 2000, p. 308). He expresses equal concern at the proliferation of availability of ‘ritual ceremonies’ in religious free markets such as that in Australia, which are government regulated and offer all manner of ritual

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<sup>30</sup> A ‘Vison Quest’ is a solitary vigil by an adolescent American Indian boy to seek spiritual power and learn through a vision the identity of his usually animal or bird guardian spirit (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

<sup>31</sup> A Native American ceremony of purification and spiritual renewal that takes place inside a structure known as a sweat lodge (Merriam Webster, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> A ‘Bat Mitzvah’ is the initiatory ceremony of a Jewish girl at 12 or more years of age when she assumes religious responsibilities (Merriam Webster, 2023).

<sup>33</sup> A Quinceañera, in Mexican and other Latin American cultures, is a ritual to mark a girl’s passage from girlhood to womanhood usually on her 15th birthday (Merriam Webster, 2023).

ceremonies. One of the 1,550 registered wedding and funeral celebrants operating in Australia describes the ever-growing business model there as being ethically ‘as dry as dust’ but states that it is the ‘emotional and imaginative clout’ of the myths and the rites around those ceremonies which are more important (Grimes, 2000, p. 309). The same celebrant proclaims that one of the problems in today’s pluralistic society is that even though the central ‘one for all’ myths and rituals offered in the past, usually by the dominant religions, have lost their appeal for some people, there is still a need for ritual but that there is now a ‘competition for souls’ and other value systems are becoming as entrenched as the once dominant religious ones. While there is general acknowledgement of the growing need that some people have to work in the spaces between religious and non-religious so that there is more flexibility than is available from official forms of religion or from clergy, Grimes suggests that there are several issues which need to be debated, particularly the issue of who can call these unregulated practitioners into question and how accountability can be demanded and monitored. He also suggests that more attention needs to be paid to the issue of how this competitive modern ritual market increasingly engenders the fostering of a ‘capitalism of the spirit’ (Grimes, 2000, p. 309).

Another example of how sacred rituals are reimagined and repurposed (and some would say dangerously misappropriated) is that of the popularity of Yagé ceremonies which in past decades have been spread by indigenous shamans to urban centres in Peru and Colombia (Rincón, 2020) and in a similar vein the Ayahuasca ceremonies which are now very popular and attractive to westerners what is termed ‘shamanic tourism’ (Fotiou, 2016, pp. 158-164). This contemporary trend has its critics and is regarded as problematic because of the prevalence of many rogue ‘shamans’ conducting ceremonial work with very powerful mind-altering substances. Such substances, if not administered in the right circumstances or without the experience and knowledge of trusted specialists or indeed without the proper

reintegration processes, can leave participants in vulnerable and unstable mental states which can affect them in very negative ways for a long-time post-ritual.

According to Fotiou, this appropriation of culture unhelpfully stereotypes local indigenous groups and serves to ‘perpetuate erroneous and detrimental assumptions about the Other’ (Fotiou, 2016, p. 165). In addition, she declares that shamanism, in this context, loses its central cosmological significance and has a hand in forcing indigenous groups into a capitalist trajectory because it is the most lucrative or more reasonable source of income at a time when their land and resources are stripped away (p. 170). Grimes (2000) declares that despite the debates which rage on about this topic, unless we are prepared to try to find an ‘authentic’ someone to officiate whatever it is that we are attempting to solemnise, the problem facing those who are seeking a solemnising ritual for modern occasions is that there are simply not enough people in the contemporary secularised world who are experienced enough to enact and perform rites in modern-day contexts. In Grimes’ opinion, no matter how one feels about the right or the wrong of using older traditions and rituals in a modern context, we have no choice but to ‘mine the past’ and reinvent and reimagine rituals, but in doing so we must ensure that the approach is as sensitive as possible:

Passages can be negotiated without the benefit of rites, but in their absence, there is a greater risk of speeding through the dangerous intersections of the human life course [...]. Unattended, a major life passage can become a yawning abyss, draining off psychic energy, engendering social confusion, and twisting the course of the life that follows it. Unattended passages become spiritual sinkholes around which hungry ghosts, those greedy personifications of unfinished business, hover (Grimes, 2000, pp. 5,6).

In considering all the issues addressed above, we see various perspectives around the topic of ritual both with regard to how it is represented and theorized, why people ritualise, and whether or how people should ritualise today. What appears to be fundamental to all ritual endeavours is that people are attempting to feel a deep ‘belonging’, searching for a

connection to community, re-exploring their personal histories and connecting with ancestors, and they do this through imagination and invention. There appears to be a common thread that runs through all the issues around the topic. I argue throughout this thesis that this common thread is that there seems to be what Susan Bell declares as an ‘authoritative force’ at play in ritual-making which ‘transcends ontological order’ and which lies beyond social and institutional hierarchies (Bell, 1997, p. 169). In other words, it seems that there is a powerful force found in ritual, whether old, invented or reinvented, and is an entity which draws belief, adherence, and attachment because it provides a safe spiritual, physical, communal ‘holding’ for ritual actors and seekers and it is this ‘force’ which brings people to continually seek ritual in their lives both in the past and in the present.

However, to connect with this ‘force’ up to now in a world that Grimes describes as being ‘ritually deprived’ has meant that people feel the need to select parts of rituals and rites from other cultures. This practice, no matter how well defended, may never sit comfortably with the groups they are being borrowed from. The issue remains that it is difficult for some cultural groups or individuals to reconnect with their own ritual forms or cultural histories due to the influences of religious or (sometimes foreign) political power. In some instances, rituals have been forgotten or no longer practiced due to generational shame and embarrassment caused by the expectation of contemporary society to be ‘respectable’ and less ‘pagan’. The practice of lament has become undesirable over time for this reason, with the result that this once common method of using voice in a ritualistic, ‘liminal’, transformative and restorative way, has receded from common use and memory.

The Irish ritual lament tradition of keening has changed and morphed over time and then more or less disappeared for nearly a century. An attempt at reimagining it in the contemporary world is being made – as will be described and analysed in the coming chapters – but this process is not without challenges. The next chapter looks specifically at a case of

how the Karelian Lament tradition in Finland is being reimagined and repurposed and how it became the inspiration for the Irish keening workshops in this study.

## Chapter 5: Reimagining Lament in Finland

In this chapter, I give a brief overview of the story of Karelian lament in Finland and its first, second, and third ‘lives’ (Tenhunen, 2006) and how this relates to my research. I explain how the almost extinct Karelian practice of ritual lament has been revived by enthusiasts in Finland, and I analyse lament revivalist movement *Äänellä Itkijät* based in Finland which, as mentioned previously, since the late 1990’s has been repurposing and reviving the previously diminishing Karelian lament tradition for more practical use as a wellbeing tool in contemporary times. I describe how the lament workshop model has become accepted as a means of transmitting lament composition skills among many Finns, both those of Karelian descent as well as those with no Karelian connections. I draw on the work of Wilce (2011) who has researched this phenomenon for many years as well as direct accounts told to me by the woman largely considered as the founder of the group, Pirkko Fihlman, and her associate, Tuomas Rounakari, and other lamenters that I met on my fieldtrip to Helsinki in 2017.

I go on to describe the reasons relayed to me by those research collaborators in Finland about what draws people to come to these workshops to learn about this old ritual and why this revivalist movement is so important to them. For some, the interest in healing and wellbeing stems from what they refer to as ‘generational trauma’ while for others their interest began as an inspiration for their professional or academic work but later it aroused a much deeper reaction which has positively affected their personal lives also. This chapter presents an analysis of a movement that has revived and re-moulded an older form of lamenting that has morphed and changed with the centuries according to the socio-economic and political changes affecting those who practiced it and which in its current form is being utilized as a healing modality. The overall aim of this chapter is to illustrate the significance and value in the reimagining of, and the ‘borrowing’ from, older rituals for use in the contemporary world.

## Karelian history

The Karelian communities which exist today in Finland were once part of a much larger ethnic group who, up until the mid-twentieth century, was located in a province within Finnish territory called 'Karelia'. This territory straddled Finland's Eastern border with Russia; however, following the Winter War (November 1939 to March 1940), the Finns ceded this region to Russia as part of the peace negotiations. As a result of this decision, 420,000 Karelians were evacuated *en masse* from their homeland and re-settled throughout various parts of Finland allotted to them as evacuees (Saffle, 2015, p. 7). Since that time, Karelians have been spread around disparate areas of Finland and have, for the most part, assimilated into Finnish life. Second or third generation Finno-Karelians would still generally identify culturally as Karelian whilst considering themselves also Finnish citizens (Stepanova, 2015; Wilce, 2011). Lamenting was a very strong feature of Karelian social and private life in their original homeland towns and villages of Karelia. The performance of laments in Karelia up until the early twentieth century happened typically at funerals where skilled 'cry women' were engaged when someone in their families or the community passed away (Wilce 2011, p. 572). Laments were also performed at times of emigration, army conscription, and at other occasions of partings or rites of passage such as weddings:

Skilled *itkijänaiset*, 'cry women' (i.e., lamenters with noteworthy ability) would lead mortuary rituals, and other women would join them in choral response. [...] These crying songs magically aided the newly deceased in their journey to *tuonela*, 'the other world' (Wilce 2011, p. 6).

Lament was also drawn on privately by women in their everyday lives and it served as a means to relieve stressful social situations for many women in times of personal suffering and strife. These laments are described as 'situational' or 'occasional' laments, where women were said to often go off to quiet areas near their homes to bemoan their own troubles in life

(Wilce, 2011, p. 6). This use of lament was corroborated by my main collaborator, Pirkko, when she told the story of her own Karelian great-grandmother's lamenting:

When my mother was little, lamenting was a living tradition, especially when there was a funeral in village. Also, the women went to the forest to cry out their sorrows. My mother's grandmother did so, and my mother told me how she would run after her and listen to her laments (email communication 9/11/2018).

Following Anna Lisa Tenhunen's (2006) approach, Wilce explains that Karelian lament has had three 'lives'. The first 'life' being the form which existed pre-1900's in the Karelian homeland, as described above, during rites of passage where it was a common part of life. By the early twentieth century, as the frequency and visibility of lament performance had begun to decrease when Karelians were physically dispersed across various regions, their laments developed a 'second life' when the women sang about the sadness of having to leave their Karelian homelands, and their lament topics were often around the subject of the difficulties they experienced in settling into Finnish life. My collaborator Tuomas Rounakari tells me that those evacuated from Karelia helped each other by lamenting:

Before our revival, there was also a time when laments became known, as those evacuated from Karelia helped each other by laments (Email from Tuomas Rounakari, September 2019).

Laments also began to garner interest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from folklorists seeking out 'traditional' Finnish music and customs. Laments were often found being performed in non-traditional contexts also, such as large-scale folkloristic performance settings as cultural performances for tourists (Porter, 2001; Wilce, 2011, p. 4). In the last few decades of the twentieth century, the practice of old-style Karelian lament began to decline again, and this was mostly because by then there were very few first-generation Karelian

women still alive in Finland who had the skill of lament performance.<sup>34</sup> The memory of this custom (which was traditionally transmitted orally, from generation to generation and learned by regular performance) gradually began to fade. Wilce (2011) informs us that shame and embarrassment were also factors which led to the reduction of lament practice. During the mid to late twentieth century, the largely Orthodox Christian Karelians and their descendants became gradually assimilated into a Lutheran Finnish environment where Karelian customs were often derided and stigmatized by resident Finns, in part due to their unfamiliarity with such traditions. As a result, a stigma of shame developed around many of the old Karelian customs. The performance of lament, in particular, became an embarrassment and a mark of being ‘other’ and it became a practice that most Karelians and their descendants, who were attempting to assimilate, were happy to forget (Wilce, 2011, p. 575).

Pirkko Fihlman told me in one of our chats that for the first-generation Karelian evacuees, along with the shame which became associated with lament, even thinking or talking about lament sometimes brought back painful memories for people, as it did for her own mother. When Pirkko was young she had often heard her mother telling stories about when she herself was a young girl back in Karelia and about how she would follow her own mother (Pirkko’s grandmother) out to the woods sometimes, where she would hear her lament. In the latter decades of the twentieth century and under the pressure to assimilate, opportunities for the first-generation Karelian women now living in Finnish society to practice, perform, and pass on the skill of lament to the next generation rarely presented themselves and so the practice of lament waned. Karelian communities were now widely dispersed throughout Finland and the upcoming generation of Karelians became as much

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<sup>34</sup>With the exception of Martta Kuikka (1921-2005) and Klaudia Vonkkanen (1916-2001) who were still performing the old style Karelian laments in the tradition handed down to them by their Karelian elders since they were young (Hackett, 2011).

imbued in Finnish ways as Karelian; therefore, the younger generations had become somewhat removed from the old Karelian culture and traditions.

### Modern Karelian Lament

Karelian lament as it exists today, in its revived and reformulated state, has entered what Wilce (2011) describes as its ‘third life’. Although in the latter years of the twentieth century, lament in Finland was in a state of decline, folklorists and historians were still interested in the tradition. One of those folklorists, Liisa Matveinen, began to develop classes teaching about lament during the 1980s (Wilce, 2011, p. 4). This style of lament ‘class’ has been further developed during the last twenty years by Pirkko Fihlman, her co-founder Tuomas Rounakari, and the many lament teachers who have emerged from their workshops over the years, who add their own personal touches to the basic workshop framework.

The style of present-day Finnish lamenters follows the ‘occasional’ or ‘situational’ laments of the past and an important function in what Wilce (2011) calls ‘neo-lament’ is the element of what today we term as ‘healing’ or ‘wellbeing’ (Wilce, 2011, p. 6). For Pirkko Fihlman, her life journey of lament initially materialized in a very organic way around 1996. Then in her sixties, having retired as a social worker and having reared her own family, she got involved with helping her husband Ensio Fihlman, an avid local historian, who had written a play about Karelian history, which he was producing and staging in Helsinki. Ensio asked Pirkko if she would perform an old lament as part of the play, to demonstrate one of the old Karelian customs. Having no personal experience of lamenting herself, Pirkko had to do some research. Her first port of call was her mother, but when she pressed her mother to recount some of her memories of the tunes or the words of her own laments, she met with resistance. For Pirkko’s mother, the task of recollection of the lament tradition from her homeland just brought back memories of shame and sadness and so she asked Pirkko not to ask this of her any further.

Pirkko, then sought out some instruction from two of the last remaining Karelian lamenting women living in Finland, Martta Kuikka (1921-2005) and Klaudia Vonkkanen (1916-2001), as well as asking one of the pioneer lament revivalists, Liisa Matveinen, and others to help her. With this instruction, and with the help of the many recordings available to her from the huge wealth of archived lament materials, Pirkko was able to learn some of laments to perform in the play. Pirkko told me that once she started to lament, it came easy to her. She felt that the skill of lament was already ‘in her blood’ and that she must have had some ‘genetic memory’ of it; she then began to compose her own laments. After her performance of laments for the play, Pirkko was approached by a few people who had been in the audience, asking if she would teach them some of the Karelian laments and so the idea of giving classes began and the idea for the society *Äänellä Itkijät* was conceived<sup>35</sup>. The association became an official government-registered organization in 2001.

### The Development of *Äänellä Itkijät* Lament Revival Group

In these early days of *Äänellä Itkijät*, Pirkko was at the helm. She teamed up with a young Karelian musician, a ‘shamanic violinist’ called Tuomas Rounakari. Tuomas met lament elder Martta Kuikka around the same time that Pirkko did, when she was researching for her husband’s play. Tuomas came across Martta when he was working with a video production team who were filming a documentary about Martta’s life. While having many conversations with Martta during the filming process, he developed a deep friendship with her and, as a second generation Karelian himself, was fascinated by this custom. It was during this time that Martta began to teach Tuomas the skill of lament composition for himself, which was a profound turning point for Tuomas at that time in his life.

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<sup>35</sup> <https://itkuvirsi.net/>

Since the early days of *Äänellä Itkijät* Pirkko and Tuomas have together developed a basic framework of the lament ‘workshop’ or ‘class’ model, which is still the framework used by many lament teachers working in Finland today, although each teacher normally personalizes their own classes or incorporates certain elements of a lament class into their own practice. Pirkko and Tuomas have run regular lament workshops around Helsinki, and other parts of Finland, but these days mostly work separately; however, on occasions they still work together and remain very dear friends. When I visited in 2017, there were around 20 or so other lament workshop ‘facilitators’, or as Pirkko describes them, ‘leaders’, trained and mentored by Pirkko and Tuomas and who run their own workshops in different parts of Finland. According to Tuomas, today there are thousands of people both of Karelian descent as well as native Finns who have participated in the workshops to learn about the tradition of Karelian lament.

As mentioned earlier, whilst shame and embarrassment may have been one of the reasons that lament declined in Finland during its ‘second life’ through the twentieth century, this is certainly not something that worries lament workshop participants today. Karelian lament today is largely much appreciated as a cultural practice and embraced as a ‘wellbeing’ tool. Rounakari tells me:

This experience has really made me to reflect back 20 years, realizing how the revival of our lament tradition has brought a profound change into our society. [...]. For the past ten years, I have not had a single notion of shame in regards to lament. Nobody comes to our workshops secretly anymore. Shame has not even been discussed in depth in our workshops anymore, because there really is no need to! (email communication April 2019).

Part of the reason why lament courses are well attended and why lament appears to be so valued as a wellbeing tool in Finland is that the revival effort with the Karelian lament has regularly captured the interest of folkloristic documentary makers (as with the one mentioned

above, when Tuomas first met Martta Kuikka) and the news media. This is evident from a quick Google search where many news articles can be found on the subject. This is a fact also attested by Tenhunen: ‘The lamenting boom among contemporary women has received great publicity, and the media have done much to arouse interest in the art’ (Tenhunen in Wilce, 2011b, p.4). The media interest has also been commented on to me by Tuomas Rounakari:

Lament is a widely known and respected musical genre, whose value is widely recognized. It is practiced by hundreds. And countless news articles, radio and TV programs have dealt (*sic*) with laments from various viewpoints, educating the masses (email communication, April 2019).

Pirkko has been interviewed by the press on many occasions, and even the archivist of her own life (and the lives of her family and ancestors), keeps a careful record of everything reported in the media about her own story and the story of the *Äänellä Itkijät* association. When she is describing the history and development of the lament revival movement, she produces all the media clippings that she has collected over the past twenty years. In addition, as evidenced by Wilce (2011b), the *Äänellä Itkijät* movement has also been the focus of study by many academics, writing mostly in Finnish, with Jim Wilce (much cited within this study) probably being the most well-known academic publishing in English (Wilce, 2011b, pp. 582-589). From a personal perspective, it was refreshing to see that the general public in Helsinki seems also aware of this phenomenon.<sup>36</sup>

In equal measures, Finns and second and third generation Karelians are drawn to take part in the *Äänellä Itkijät* courses and what Wilce (2011, p. 15) describes as the ‘neo-Karelian

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<sup>36</sup> I struck up conversation with a woman sitting opposite me on a train one evening while enquiring about directions and stop changes. When she enquired about my visit, I told her about my interest in lament and she nodded and said she had heard about the lament workshops and that they were quite common. She seemed familiar and accepting of the concept so that I did not need to explain the idea to her.

revivalistic form of lamentation’ and there is seemingly an infinite number of reasons why they sign up. Wilce has identified three common reasons, but he stresses that many of the reasons overlap. People come to lament courses to inform their own therapeutic practices in the psychiatric and nursing field, or they come as academics (as Wilce himself did) to research the phenomena. Some of the lamenters that I met and interviewed during my fieldwork trip are musicians and performers studying at university and were exploring lament as part of their research and performative studies. Second and third generation Karelians often attend because they want to learn something of their old traditions. Then, many attendees with no Karelian roots at all come simply for the advertised ‘wellbeing’ properties of lament and in the hope of finding some emotional healing for themselves within this cultural ritual form. Tuomas concurs with this observation, telling me:

Most of our participants have some sort of relation to Karelia, but surely not all. For some it really is another culture that they don’t identify with but still carry a need to [have] a good cry (email communication April 2019).

Tenhunen also found these commonalities with attendees at her lament classes and the interest in Karelian lament:

Contemporary lamenters may be women from anywhere in Finland, and their reasons for taking it up differ considerably: to seek their own roots, to study folk music, to explore an interesting cultural phenomenon, to provide a therapeutic outlet for their emotions, to express themselves or to admire a traditional aesthetic (Tenhunen in Wilce, 2011, p.4).

I would position lament revival within the ‘holistic milieu’ as described by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) given its reported healing and wellbeing effects and its associated spiritual cosmology. As Heelas and Woodhead observed as being typical of the holistic milieu, the majority of lament course participants are women who come from a ‘white collar’ socio-

economic background, with relatively high educational qualifications who can afford both the time and the registration fee (Wilce, 2017, p.37).

Since the inception of *Äänellä Itkijät* over twenty-five years ago, Pirkko and Tuomas have trained a steady stream of lament teachers (around twenty at the last count and they are themselves ‘graduates’ of the lament workshops) who live in Helsinki and further afield. These lament leaders hold their own lament courses or incorporate the teaching of lament into their professional practices. One lament teacher that I interviewed has been through her own mental health journey and on occasions leads lament workshops for others in the mental health group workshops that she attends. Another lament teacher is an academic who lectures in shamanic studies in Helsinki, but who also is a shamanic practitioner and performs laments as part of her ritual repertoire. Another teacher is a Lutheran Church minister and uses lament together with prayer as a form of community healing service for her parishioners, as well as utilising lament for her own personal healing process. Lamentor Minna Hokka laments frequently about the state of the environment and particularly focuses on the destruction of forests and, for her, being a lament workshop leader is a very important role in helping others to unblock long suppressed feelings:

As a lament leader I like to facilitate those kinds of experiences for people. In various roles of the developing group and individual process of trust and surrender, giving away the mental conscious and unconscious controllers. [...] It has given me a new way to facilitate people [to] feel connection with themselves, with generations in past and future, with nature, animals, anything one can imagine. It has given an efficient way to show what's inside us and what's important for us. It gives us [a] chance to become whole together. In lament circles people give themselves [the] chance to discharge their emotional blocks again and again which make the thing natural again, which is so great (Email communication, September 2019).

Other lamenters who initially engaged with workshops simply to inform their performances as musicians have found that the process has been inspirational for the development of their

artistic endeavours. My collaborator Anna Dantchev, a Finnish musician of Bulgarian ethnicity, told me:

After my first experience as a lamenter and about lamenting, I wanted to learn and know more. This need for knowledge has taken me to research journey in Bulgaria and has affected my artistry and composing (Email communication, 2017).

Pirkko Fihlman continues to compose laments for personal things in her own life when she feels the need to voice anxieties and worries about for instance her children or when she is feeling sad about her husband's or her mother's death. She is also regularly called on to perform laments on stage and to attend conferences, and she is often asked to lament for others, sometimes at funerals, much like the lament women would have been called upon in the past. When I last visited her in June 2024, she was still teaching her lament classes. Rounakari continues to run weekend workshops in Helsinki and around Europe and the US<sup>37</sup>, and often incorporates lament into his many musical endeavours.

### Generational Trauma

Wilce tells us that the majority come to the Finnish lament courses because they are 'looking for a better form of emotional expression of their grief' (Wilce, 2009, p.220), and in my discussions with Finnish lamenters about why people come to lament workshops, never far away are conversations about some of the other unsettling events which happened in Finnish society (besides the traumas of the evacuated Karelian population) during the twentieth century, in particular the evacuation of 80,000 children from Finland during WWII.

Not long after the Winter War with Russia as outlined above, World War II very quickly followed, and in an effort to keep as many Finnish children as safe as possible and

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<sup>37</sup> <http://rounakari.com/workshops/>

to allow their parents to get involved in the war effort, the decision was made to evacuate 80,000 youngsters to temporary foster homes in Sweden and Denmark. When the war had finished, the children were then returned to their families in Finland. However, many of the evacuated children were sent to Sweden at very young ages and when they returned, they often had no memory of their Finnish lives and their families were complete strangers to them (as many were separated from their siblings also), and often they had little or no knowledge of the Finnish language, having spent several years learning and speaking Swedish (Saffle, 2015).

Sue Saffle, who is herself a 'war-child', has been gathering stories from hundreds of other war-children about this period in their childhood and about the effects the experience has had on them throughout their adult lives. Saffle's collaborators recount the shock and trauma of being sent back to Finland almost without warning and especially as some of the very young children reported believing that their Swedish foster parents were their birth parents. Saffle has heard many a testimony also from older children, who were desperately unhappy during these years in Sweden because of being subjected to abuse or harsh treatment and being worked like slaves on farms or as housekeepers. Some war-children report being bullied by the children of their foster families and treated as 'other' in school as well as in Swedish society in general. Whilst this initiative if taken in the context of its times may have been born of good intentions, it is an effort which, according to Saffle (2015), is today considered as Finland's 'great social historical mistake' (Saffle, 2015). Saffle tells us how 'thousands of war traumatized children, many greatly in need of healing and relief from often unimaginable sufferings, were gradually returning to Finland's lakes, mountains and shores' (Saffle, 2015, p. 8).

Saffle's findings have revealed that these early childhood traumatic experiences have in many cases resulted in long-term psychological damage which has lasted throughout the

adult lives of those evacuated children. In a bid to repair some of the damage caused by this effort, thousands of ‘war-child’ associations have been set up around Finland to support those affected and many ex ‘war-children’ have needed years of therapy to deal with their troubled memories of those experiences. Although individual experiences were different from person to person, Saffle has found that a common pattern emerges with regards to the effects associated with their wartime experiences such as troubling memories, feelings of emptiness and ‘rootlessness’, guilt, rejection, and other psycho/social issues (Saffle, 2015, pp. 3-5). As she points out, ‘Finland was burdened with a problem far more elusive and difficult than that of reconstruction and repatriation’ (p. 8). Several of my collaborators have attributed their ‘war-child’ experiences or what they feel is ‘generational trauma’ experienced as children (or even grandchildren) of war-children, to the mental health challenges they face today. This is a common theme often cited by *Äänellä Itkijät* workshop participants as a reason why they attend. I discuss generational trauma further in Chapters 8 and 9.

## War Child

My main collaborator Pirkko Fihlman was also one of those war-children, as were her siblings, and they too were separated from each other and from their parents and shipped off to different homes in Sweden during the war years. Pirkko has composed several laments on this theme, as have some other lamenters, and they feature on some of the association’s lament CDs. Pirkko’s own evacuee experience was in general a good one compared to many others, as she found that her foster family were very kind. They had a comfortable lifestyle and gave her the best of everything they had while she was living with them. However, it was her experience of returning to her Finnish home and estranged family which Pirkko reports as being the most traumatic. After she was sent home from Sweden, she found it very difficult to settle back to what was a much harsher life in a war-torn and poverty-stricken Finland,

which was on its knees after the ravages of many years of war and attempting to recover and rebuild.

Pirkko remembers constantly comparing this very harsh situation into which she was transplanted with her previously very comfortable Swedish life, and she also made many comparisons between her birth mother with her Swedish foster mother, the result of which meant that Pirkko's relationship with her birth mother was a fractious one for nearly thirty years until they eventually made peace with each other later in life. Pirkko explained to me that it was only when she learned the skill of lament, even though her way of doing lament was very different from the traditional model considered more 'authentic' by some folklorists, that she was able to process many of the feelings around her and her family's wartime upheavals. This demonstrates again that whilst 'traditionalists' might be pedantic about what they consider as essential and canonical elements of a lament, Pirkko's interpretation worked for her and for the several thousand participants that have gone through the lament courses designed by her.

### Reinvention and Authenticity

As discussed in the previous Chapter, concerns are voiced by many folklorists and other academics and communities interested in ritual practices when ritual 'seekers' start playing around with what is revered as 'tradition', particularly with reference to what is considered as 'authentic'. With regard to the modern revival of ritual Karelian lament, or as they term it 'neo-lament', Fenigsen and Wilce (2012) ask:

What makes a neo-lament performance an authentic one? Is it a perception of its faithfulness to a source-performer? Of its faithfulness as replica of an earlier lament, or all earlier laments (as genre) and their traditional form (as register)? Of its truth vis-à-vis the lamenter's inner state, her feelings? Of its dynamic function in the social world, seen and unseen, here and beyond? If so, how can we tell, and who is to say? (Fenigsen & Wilce, 2012, p. 183).

Wilce (2017) suggests that the revival of Karelian lament has in fact ‘multiple authenticities’ and to better analyse this in theoretical terms he highlights three concepts of authenticity within which he suggests ‘neo-lament’ can be understood: 1) ‘cultural-replicative authenticity’, which entails a claim that one lament replicates enough of the exact words and actions of previous laments to be considered a shoot from the same cultural branch, such as a lament that is modern yet contains enough traditional features to be judged an authentic replication; 2) ‘personal-expressive’ authenticity, in which modern laments seek to channel one’s ‘true’ self in cultural practices and understandings and 3) ‘spirit-relational’ authenticity, culturally understood as a reflection of a lamenter’s relationship with (i.e., to speak to) spirits, and states that: ‘Authentication using this relationship denotes a performance based on complex signs adding up to “efficacy,” which in turn reflects a relationship with the more-than-human’ (Wilce, 2017, pp. 228, 229). The last point puts me in mind of the claim by Bell (1997) in the previous chapter about the one this that appears to be in common with the practice reinvention or revival of ritual is the perception of a presence of an ‘authoritative force’, however, that might be understood (I discuss this further in Chapter 11).

Presenting an example of how these concepts of authenticity are present and can conflict with each other with regard to Karelian lament, Fenigsen and Wilce (2012) refer in particular to a criticism made in 1971 by a Finnish folklorist Anneli Asplund of a Karelian elder and ‘cry woman’ Martta Kuikka (mentioned earlier as the woman who inspired the founders of *Äänellä Itkijät*). Whilst Asplund approved of Kuikka’s performance of old well-known laments, she was very critical of Kuikka’s self-composed laments, considering the older laments more ‘authentic’ (Fenigsen & Wilce, 2012, p. 182). However, Fenigsen and Wilce suggest that Asplund of all people should have known better than seeking authenticity

in lament, because with her expertise in the area she should have known that lament has traditionally been ‘composed in performance’ and improvised on the spot; while there were always old laments, there were always new additions and new compositions added to the old ones.

Lament composition in the old days often took certain linguistic motifs and basic formats from older laments, but each new lament would normally have been different from the last and rarely would a lament be copied and replicated, as Asplund expected of Kuikka. Fenigsen and Wilce suggest that Asplund might have been seeking a replication of an older lament from Kuikka possibly looking for something from a repertoire that she was familiar with or maybe she was hoping to hear something that she may have heard her mother or grandmother sing when she was young (Fenigsen & Wilce, 2012, p. 189). Asplund was bound to be disappointed by Kuikka’s own improvised, newly composed laments, as the kind of content she was looking for was not going to present itself there: ‘to be the latest link in a tradition does not have to mean that pure replication is necessary’ (Wilce, 2011a, p. 578). Asplund’s comments caused immense hurt to Kuikka because, according to her, whether her laments were old or new, or whether they were for herself or for other people it did not matter, because she put the same emotional effort into each performance and she said that her heart broke with ‘authentic’ grief every time she performed a lament (Fenigsen & Wilce, 2012).

Others claim that if old rituals and traditions are to be used for modern purposes, the new versions should be as close to the original as possible and declare that anything less is simply an inauthentic abomination (Fenigsen & Wilce, 2012, p. 182). For folklorist Liisa Matveinen (one of the first lament revivalists in Finland in the 1980’s), strict rules around the use of lament’s metaphorical ‘language’ were deemed a necessary component in recreating an ‘authentic’ lament. For Matveinen, who defined Karelian lament as a ‘genre’, ‘sounding like lament’ means the obligatory use of the 1400 old canonical ‘*kiertoilmaisut*’

(circumlocutions) along with ‘alliteration’, ‘free meter’ and other essential linguistic features which have been identified as important elements of old laments (Stepanova in Fenigsen and Wilce, 2012, p. 111).

However, Pirkko Fihlman says that when participants in *Äänellä Itkijät* lament classes today create laments of their own she does not pressurize them to try to replicate original laments, although she does use much of the recorded material when she is demonstrating the history of Karelian lament in the introductory segment of the workshop. When I visited Pirkko, this was one of the first things she did with me also. She played many video recordings of herself and others performing laments, and she played many CD tracks of lament from the early twentieth century up to the very modern ones. Some workshop participants who have gone on to become lament teachers/leaders, do from time to time still draw on some of the traditional resources<sup>38</sup> as well as composing new laments, therefore there is often a blending of the old and the new. Of Fihlman’s method of teaching lament composition, Wilce (2012) tells us that:

Her students would compose laments whose semiotic features would be “Karelian” not in letter but in spirit, not focusing on canonical features of the old genre, but using a version of the genre to authentically perform their own feelings (Fenigsen and Wilce, 2012, p. 114).

In defence of the revival of ritual, Fenigsen and Wilce (2012) claim that modern lamenters in Finland find ‘authenticity’ in the therapeutic effect of lament because each lament is authentic in ‘spirit’ for the individual lamenter and that ‘these flexible, robust, ever-emergent “replicas” of traditional lament are the new authentic laments’ (Fenigsen and Wilce, 2012, p.

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<sup>38</sup> For example, performer Emmi Knutten often sings laments that she has learned from recordings in the archival collection.

193). Wilce argues that modern lamenters are innovators who ‘encourage deep self-expression, not literal faithfulness to traditional forms’ (Wilce, 2011a, p. 578).

## Conclusion

Returning to the issues around ritual and reinvention presented in Chapter 4 and based on what appears to have been a very positive revitalization of the Karelian lament in modern Finland as outlined above, it is easy to agree with those who argue that the reviving and reinvention of ritual customs is something which has always happened and thus is something that is essential to navigate through in the contemporary world. What could be termed as ‘neo-ritual practices’ such as the Karelian lament revival, which is inspired by older (and sometimes only half-remembered) versions of what is considered ‘original’, can successfully and sensitively be utilized in changing situational contexts over time. It is safe to assert here that the changes which have happened to Karelian lament throughout the three lives (and maybe there will be more ‘lives’ as time goes on) are naturally occurring changes which needed to happen so that it could continue to be useful in the various contexts that have unfolded over several centuries.

The Finno-Karelians have made good use of this ritual practice throughout the various socio/economic and political upheavals in Finland over centuries, and its popularity has ebbed and flowed and drawn in different parties. As described previously, social upheaval is one of the reasons why ritual practices in oral societies can change and I argue that a revival of this and other old, forgotten, or marginalised ritual customs, despite concerns about authenticity, are very often timely and regarded as necessary by their practitioners and adherents. Karelian lament, in its modern form, has proven to be an effective tool for the navigation of personal and societal transitions and, according to those involved, has steered its advocates through the challenges they face in contemporary times.

The success of the Karelian lament revival demonstrates how effective this rethinking of an out of use lament custom is in a modern context as a coping tool for grief, trauma, and everyday societal pressures and stress. Those involved with the *Äänellä Itkijät* organisation demonstrate how reviving the Karelian lament tradition has worked well as a wellbeing tool in Finland for contemporary times. They have shown how the workshop model is a useful means to transmit lament composition skills to many who are interested in the tradition but who have not received familial or community knowledge as would have been the case in the past. As outlined here, the workshops have helped and inspired people from different walks of life, all connected by the power of lament. In the next chapter I discuss my experiences during my fieldwork trip to Helsinki with the wonderful lamenters who shared their laments as well as their enthusiasm with me for this project.

## **Chapter 6: My Experience of Äänellä Itkijat – Fieldwork in Finland**

This chapter contains ethnographic description of my experiences as a participant-observer at lament workshops in Finland which I analyse from different perspectives in later chapters. As explained before, the lament revival group *Äänellä Itkijat* have repurposed Karelian lament as a healing and wellbeing tool. In discussions with the group founders, they felt it was important to convey to me that they don't claim to heal people when they advertise the workshops. However, in my discussions with workshop participants, I found that the terms 'healing' and 'wellbeing' were used as descriptors for their experiences and takings from the workshops.

In Chapter 3 I discuss Irish historical lament and its important function as a means of expressing and handling grief in the community. However, the modern term 'wellbeing' and the use of therapeutic devices in the context of what Heelas and Woodhead (2005) have dubbed the 'holistic milieu', is a new cultural phenomenon, so the terms 'wellbeing' and 'healing' was not part of the language around keening in Ireland or Finland in the past, that we are aware of. The continual forms of lament practiced in Romania and Greece today are not necessarily considered by those who perform or witness them to be 'therapeutic' in nature either (Gamliel cited in Wilce, 2011b, p. 9), with the possible exception of a Māori example (Wilce, 2011b, p. 7). Given the unique context, I was enthusiastic to experience what these lament workshops in Finland were like.

## Making Contact

In December 2016, I emailed Pirkko Fihlman, the co-founder and long-time Chairperson of the *Äänellä Itkijät* association<sup>39</sup>, to say that I was interested in attending a lament workshop and my reasons why. Pirkko replied almost immediately and invited me to visit Helsinki in January 2017. She offered me a place to stay in her home and to tutor me in one-to-one lament composition in English (her workshops are usually delivered in Finnish), and to furnish me with detailed information on how she and others had developed the *Äänellä Itkijät* lament workshop model over the past twenty-five years. Pirkko also promised to arrange for me to meet with some English-speaking lamenters and lament teachers during my visit, as well as to help in organising trips to Karelian and Finnish Folklore archives so that I could look at and listen to lament materials in those archives. She also organised a group lamenting session with English-speaking lamenters who were to come from Helsinki and elsewhere. She even arranged for the lament scholars Jim Wilce<sup>40</sup> and Eila Stepanova<sup>41</sup> as well as the co-founder of *Äänellä Itkijät*, Tuomas Rounakari, to convene at her home during my stay there.

In January 2017, I landed in Helsinki and was taken to Pirkko's house. From the outset, Pirkko's mental energy levels astounded me, given that she was struggling with her physical health (and due to have hip and knee replacements). She had organised a detailed schedule for my stay, the first of our one-to-one lament sessions timetabled to start promptly at 9am the morning after I arrived. Once I had landed in Helsinki and spent the first evening talking to Pirkko, I settled into the little room she had set up for me (her husband Ensio's old

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<sup>39</sup> Pirkko has since my visit passed the baton of Chairperson on to other members of the association and in 2024 was again acting as chairperson.

<sup>40</sup> Jim Wilce is an authority on lament traditions around the world, particularly in Bangladesh and Finland, where he has conducted many years of fieldwork and is the author of one of my central reference sources on lament (Wilce, 2009). Jim was due to call to see Pirkko in the week of his visit to Finland, so this was a great opportunity for me to meet him.

<sup>41</sup> Eila Stepanova and her mother Alexandra Stepanova are highly regarded authorities on Karelian and Ingrian lament being authors of many important academic publications on the topic (Stepanova, 2015).

office) with its single bed and walls decorated with pictures of Ensio in his army uniform and other pictures and memorabilia dotted around. I updated my fieldnotes and began to read the hard copy of *Crying Shame: Metaculture, Modernity, and the Exaggerated Death of Lament* by James Wilce (2009) which Pirkko had in her library. I had already read some of this book back in Ireland, but I wanted to go through it again. I was excited to know that I would meet the author later in the week, and wanted to make sure I could say that I had read his book ‘properly’.

On this trip I completely immersed myself in the world of Karelian lament, taking part in a series of daily intensive sessions with Pirkko, where she talked me through hours of CDs and videos of old Karelian laments and newer Finno-Karelian laments, and patiently translated the words from Karelian or Finnish into English. She played me recordings of the very old laments taken by Ediphone (a device used for audio recording) in the early twentieth century. While these were digitally enhanced on CD, they still had a crackle present from the original Ediphone recordings. Other recordings she played for me went right up to recent digital and professionally produced CD recordings produced by *Äänellä Itkijät* as well as those produced by individual musicians.

The next day after our breakfast of cornflakes and blueberry sauce (a completely alien concept to me but very common breakfast fare in Finland according to Pirkko) and toast and coffee, we went upstairs to Pirkko’s office via the spiral staircase, which Pirkko ascended on a stairlift because of her hips. The house was what you would call an upside-down house because the main entrance brought you into a hallway which had a small toilet and three bedrooms directly off it (one converted into Pirkko’s office, another her bedroom and one my little bedroom-cum-office). To get downstairs to the living room, kitchen, main bathroom (complete with sauna, apparently a feature in most Finnish household) and out to the garden, you went down the spiral staircase.

Pirkko began our work together, telling me about the history of Karelian lament in Finland and her own experiences of lament. She recounted the story of how she came to ‘rediscover’ lament herself and how she set up *Äänellä Itkijät* with Tuomas Rounakari, her long time collaborator and friend. She also sang me a few of the laments that she had written herself. Most of the laments that she played and sang were in Finnish, so I asked her to translate them for me. She went into great detail about the lament workshop process and its various stages over two days and she described the vocal tools utilized which help people to ‘let go’ of their sorrow, trouble, grief, and any other thing that ails them. I had many questions for Pirkko during these days, some examples here taken from my field notes:

When did Ensio ask her to lament? What ages was she then? Was Ensio Karelian? Does she remember her mother saying that she was ashamed of lament because it marked then different to Finns? Does she lament her own war-child story

At this stage she brought me through the step-by-step process of the workshops and described some of the basic teaching methods for a two-day workshop which she and Tuomas have devised and used successfully for over twenty-five years. Finnish lament workshops (referred to also as classes) are held usually over two days. Pirkko explained that she mostly holds her workshops in the local school halls, or she sometimes might use a community hall. Tuomas, on the other hand, told me that he prefers to run weekend ‘residential retreat’ type events these days. The groups are usually small, with an ideal number of participants being from eight to twelve. Other lament teachers hold their workshops in a variety of settings but as far as I am aware (I have not researched this element of the Finnish Workshops) in general use the same two-day workshop model.

## The Stages of the Finnish Lament Workshop

The first step in the lament workshops that Pirkko and Tuomas have run is to find out, in a roundtable discussion with participants, what inspired them to attend the workshop and to get an idea of what they have in mind for the composition of their lament. Tuomas told me that there is a myriad of reasons why people come to the workshops, but the overarching reason is that they seek ‘permission’ and a ‘safe space’ in which they can cry and express themselves freely:

Most participants are looking for a permission. A permission to cry, but also a permission to lament, permission to be part of a tradition. People ask things like could I do a lament this way or that way, asking permission to try (Email from Tuomas, April 2018).

He also points out that he doesn’t expect people to reveal their identity or professions during workshops, as in this setting it is unimportant:

I also tell that they don’t have to introduce their names (as sometimes name and titles carry your conditioned self), and some people have chosen to be called with a nickname from childhood for example. This is a bit extreme, but if a person does not tell about their profession, do not ask for it inside the group. Especially elderly people tend to identify differently, and they consciously choose not to remember their professional life (Email from Tuomas, April 2018).

In the early days when their workshops first started, Pirkko and Tuomas would begin with a history lesson about Karelian lament, informing the group of the longevity of the tradition and of its more recent history of decline. They explained to me that it is important to highlight to participants how close they still are in Finland to the living lament culture because it is not so long ago that lament was a regular feature of Karelian life in the Finnish context. They explain how the lamenting women in those Karelian communities that were relocated to Finland were also often seen as healers, how they helped with birthing and the washing of the dead, and how they had a special, respected role in society. The participants hear about

the reasons why people lamented in the past and why it was especially important for young women to learn lament. Pirkko explained:

When young women got married into a stranger's home, they knew how to heal themselves of sadness. They lamented the sorrow of leaving home and how to deal with the new family and say goodbye to their own family (lament lesson with Pirkko January 2017).

However, Tuomas says that today, although there is always a need to touch a little on the history of the Karelian lament for those who may not be familiar with it, the historical element doesn't have to happen in so much detail anymore:

20 years ago, we always continued with history. Discussing what the tradition was like, educating the masses kind of a way, but through in a circle rather than lecturing. The need to do this has reduced, as people know so much more now, than back then. (Email from Tuomas, April 2018).

Tuomas generally starts his lament workshops with a cleansing ceremony of smudge sticks or sage, he tells me: 'On the 3-day retreats I do nowadays, I begin with a cleansing ceremony, where people symbolically clean themselves from everything that does not serve the weekend.' Pirkko did not mention that this cleansing ceremony happens in her workshops, and I found out later from her in conversation that she is not too fond of this kind of element, which she terms 'shamanic', being used in the context of her own workshops. However, she is accepting of the fact that different people bring different things to their own workshops. I reflected on this 'shamanistic' idea of lament in my reading notes:

Did lament have a hypnotic element? Drink and snuff (possibly other substances-ask Briody) were present? Would poitin have been that substance? Was there an Irish 'Ayahuasca'?! If the keeners took poitin is that how they could converse/connect with the other world...were they shamans?

I did not explore this idea any further, but it is potentially a topic for consideration at a later stage.

After the initial discussions and maybe a quick ten-minute break, participants are offered picture ‘prompts’ which are random images that have been cut out of magazines and laid around the floor in the middle of the group circle for people to select. The purpose of this exercise is to help participants to focus on their topic for the day and to help them to think about feelings which might relate to their chosen picture/s. Participants are asked to spend some time looking at the images and to pick up the ones which appeal to them, and which might inspire them to reflect further on their own lament composition ideas. They are encouraged to begin to write some loose ideas and associations down around what these pictures mean to them.

After the break, participants are then given a talk about ‘lament language’ or ‘weeping language’ called *itkukieli*. This is the language thought to be used to communicate with ancestors who were addressed in the lament. Wilce (2017) explains that in using the *itkukieli* or ‘lament register’ lamenters felt that they were ‘communicatively acting with, upon and for these beings’ (Wilce, 2017, p.234). The use of *itkukieli* also involves the process of finding other descriptors for the addressee of the lament.<sup>42</sup> Lamenters traditionally did not mention the name of the addressee of their lament directly but instead used other words to describe them. The word ‘mother’ for instance, would be replaced with something like ‘one who carried me’ or ‘father’ would be replaced with ‘one who supported me’. Tuomas also mentioned this and says jokingly that:

You can even say one who didn’t support me (with a laugh), but the point is to be able to describe the person without saying their name.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Traditionally, this would be family members like mother, father, husband etc., but today can be anything such as ‘Mother Earth’, the forest, the environment, cancer, and so on. Basically, it seems to be whatever or whoever the lament is being addressed to.

<sup>43</sup> This is something which is found also in the famous Irish lament ‘Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire’ or the Lament for Art Ó Laoghaire’ where the lamentor ‘Eibhlín Dubh’ addresses Art as ‘my closest and dearest!’, ‘my friend and my little calf!’, ‘my dear and beloved one!’, and so on.

Described also as ‘circumlocutions’ (Stepanova, 2015), lament language was seen as a sacred feature of Karelian lament because it was considered that only the spirits could understand this language (Wilce, 2011b, p. 7). Stepanova (2015) has written at length on metaphor and lament language used in Karelian and Ingrian lament and in particular the practice of mentioning names and of the ‘magical’ property of naming<sup>44</sup>. Pirkko advises that it is alright to express that you personally are feeling sorrowful, for example saying, ‘I am miserable’ or ‘poor unhappy me’, but the subject must always be addressed and spoken about in a soft, kind manner and in metaphorical language. I found that using metaphor was a very useful device for my own lament composition, which I discuss later. There is usually a lunch break around this stage.

After lunch, the workshop moves onto breathing, grounding, and ‘sounding’ exercises: yawning and ‘oooooh’ ‘ahhhh’ sounds and other vowel type sounds. There is also an exercise where participants are invited to sing a ‘silly’ song about their morning which, when tried for the first time, may feel and sound strange but because it is an exercise which draws smiles and laughter, it makes people feel less self-conscious about using their voice in an unconventional way. In this exercise, people become familiar with their own voice sounding ‘strange’ i.e., not really singing and not really talking but somewhere in between. It is an important part of the process of learning to shed one’s conditioning about ‘respectable’ or ‘normal’ vocal sounds. These exercises allow people to hear and accept their own voices in a way not usually expressed in public or in a group situation. It gives them permission to hear their voice in what is normally considered an ‘ugly’ way, tuneless and without form. This familiarizes participants with the concept of improvisation which is a

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<sup>44</sup> See Wilce (2017) for more information on this aspect.

characteristic feature of lament, and I discuss this further in Chapters 7 on Re-envisioning Irish Lament and 9 on Lasting Bonds—Communitas and Collective Emotion.

Pirkko tells me that all of the above – giving historical information, looking at videos, listening to samples, going around to each participant to discuss why they have come, looking at picture prompts, picking a theme, doing exercises and asking people afterwards how they feel and what they might lament about the next day – is about as much as can be achieved in one day. At the end of the day participants are given some ‘homework’ and directed to practice writing about their chosen theme in the evening and to continue to reflect on their pictures, or to go and walk in nature for further inspiration. Pirkko’s students usually go home or to their accommodation, as she does not run a residential course, but Tuomas tells me that he prefers weekend retreats where people can mingle, eat together, and are able to walk in nice surroundings. He suggests that it is nice also for participants to be ‘cared for’ by the host and to bond with the other participants while they are in what can be very vulnerable states, when they are opening up their emotions. When I asked Pirkko about this, she said she has never had problems with her process of letting people go home and come in again the next day.

Day 2 of the workshops starts with some more talk about the efficacy of lament as a healing tool. Pirkko, for instance, talks about how lament ‘cures the soul’ and ‘uncovers layers’ and brings people from ‘darkness to the light’. The rest of this day is mostly taken up with various strategies to help participants to think about and to compose the ‘bones’ of a lament. The latter part of the day is mostly involved with going around the room and hearing everyone’s lament. This is when emotions begin to run high. People begin to cry and sob noisily either while doing their own lament or along with the person who is lamenting and addressing whatever situation is ailing them, using the techniques of voicework and language learned the previous day. The focus, though, is always on the lamenter and support is offered

by fellow participants in either humming noises or sobbing and crying along with them. Participants are advised earlier in the day not to hug or comfort the lamenter but just to let them find their own way through it. At the end of the day there is a meditation and quiet discussion. Pirkko tells me that at this point at the end of her workshops, she hands around a form to participants for feedback.

Finally, exhausted from a day of intense concentration and listening and trying to make a note of everything in my fieldnotes, it was time for me to return to my little room and think about what I was going to lament about the next day. I was also keen to look over my scribbled notes and make sure that I hadn't forgotten any details, and I was also trying to concentrate on Wilce's book. My researcher's brain was busy trying to keep a note of everything and I was worried that if I concentrated too much on the lament, that I might miss something else important going on around me, so I found it difficult to think about what could go into my own lament for the next day. I was also slightly worried about whether I was expected to cry in my sessions with Pirkko the next day and on the day that the lamenters were coming. Pirkko was adamant that to be able to understand what lament was, you had to take part in the sessions (so I took this to mean that I had to cry also, which was a bit of a daunting prospect!). I didn't have anything that I felt particularly sad about going on in my personal life at that time and thankfully I had not experienced any major traumas in my life up to then that had affected me very deeply. I had a happy childhood and had not experienced the death of a significant person in my life yet, so I had no experience of grief at that level to think about. I have had probably as much romantic heartbreak as anyone in adult life and have grieved for a few much-loved animals that have died, but that is about it as far as grieving went, so in this respect I did worry about what I might lament about. Pirkko told me in one conversation that week that once a person gets into lament, they never know what eventually will come out. She said, 'lament uncovers layers, and it lifts a burden'. She

mentioned also the advice of her own mentor Marta Kuikka, one of the last Karelian women to sing laments in the old style, as mentioned previously, who also said, ‘there is always a layer which someone has never told out’.

### My First Lament

As the second day went on and we began to explore possible themes for my lament and I skimmed through the many picture ‘prompts’ (which Pirkko keeps a stock of in a folder), I was very drawn to pictures of animals and nature. The current state of the environment is of great worry and frustration to me and as a vegan, the treatment of animals in intensive farming is a very emotive subject, so this was the area which I felt I needed to express some feeling about in my lament. Here Pirkko advised me to ‘write down what the picture brings up in your mind, put yourself in the picture’. I eventually settled on a picture of a field ripe with wheat, ready for harvest which overlooked a beautiful lake, an idyllic farm scene with beautiful green fields and sky-blue water. But that is not what I saw in that picture and in my notes, I wrote:

Where can flowers grow? Where is life?

Rather than this beautiful scene being a pleasure to me, I began to look beyond it, to what is happening in the air and the ground above and underneath the pictorial beauty of this scene.

I wrote in my fieldnotes:

When I think of this, I feel no pleasure from the scenery.

Underneath I see the land, before it was sown, fed with chemical fertilizer and waste from animals which eat last year’s oats and grass sprayed also with chemicals. I see this running into the seemingly pure water but then the water is polluted, killing and poisoning all in the water, including the fish that we eat. The air takes up the poison and drops as polluted rain.

In thinking about this picture and picturing myself in the scene, I realised that Pirkko and Martta were right, I do have a ‘layer’ and a burden which carries sadness for me which is related to the damage being done to the environment and that I carry feelings of hopelessness and frustration with me all of the time. In this first lament, I attempted to verbalize the grief that often overcomes me when I think about this topic. However, whilst I was writing a few pages of verses to try and express my feelings, I found that writing from a first-person perspective brought up familiar feelings of anger and hopelessness about the situation and had the effect of making me feel more irritated, frustrated, and blocked rather than helping me to be creative. Explaining this to Pirkko, she suggested for me to consider something:

How would it feel to BE this scene, how would it feel if you spoke as the field, to become the field? Also, when you lament there must always be a listener even if it is an inanimate object: the sorrow must go somewhere, otherwise it is just a moan to nothing.

To help me, Pirkko gave an example of a lament that she had written a few years earlier, when she had been diagnosed with breast cancer (now in remission):

I talked to the cancer, ‘GET OUT! GET OUT!’ and told it to become something in the air, which will fall as a drop of rain onto something which grows as something good. I was looking to change the situation, a movement outwards from deep inside through imagery. The ‘thing’ is outside of you, lament shows the path from misery to light.

This concept shifted everything for me. Once I began to imagine myself as the field, as ‘the thing outside of me’ rather than speaking as myself and then began to speak as the field to Mother Earth as the ‘listener’, the words flowed much more easily, and I was much happier with my second attempt. It was through the process of this lament composition that I also reconnected unexpectedly with the Irish language. Once I began to translate (as best I could as a non-fluent Irish speaker) some terms such as, for instance, *mother* (for Mother Earth) into the Irish language, the flow of emotion came to me in a much deeper way.

When I look back at this first lament of mine in Helsinki, having participated in several more lament workshops since (which I discuss Chapter 7), I realise that with this lament, I was trying too hard to write something meaningful and I realise now that I didn't really fully experience the 'letting go' which I now know is needed to experience lament in its fullest sense. There was I think a certain fear of the unknown, and also with my 'research hat' on I was torn between the responsibility and concentration needed to chart the process and participate at the level which is needed during participant observation. Also, I was quite self-conscious about the whole idea of letting go back then.

After witnessing the laments from the other lamenters later in the week of my trip, I realised that letting go was not such a frightening thing, as once everyone had lamented, they were easily able to come 'back to reality' and laugh and joke over cups of tea. Later in the week when I was chatting to Tuomas, I mentioned this fear of not being able to control the crying and letting go too much and I wondered if it was ever a problem for them in workshops. He assured me that this might have happened only once that he could remember in the twenty years of running workshops because crying is self-regulatory and eventually people stop and come around, even if they get into a fairly raw state in a workshop. I realise now in hindsight that the old Karelian saying that lamenting is 'crying until it is done' is so very true.

### [Archive Visit](#)

During my visit to Helsinki, Pirkko had arranged for me to visit the Sibelius Music Academy and the Finnish Folklore Society, accompanied by folk music student, performer and lamenter Emmi Kuittinen (who also became my unofficial tour guide of Helsinki for an afternoon). Emmi introduced me that day also to her friend, Anna Dantchev, a folk music performer and composer of Bulgarian ethnicity born in Finland. Both Emmi and Anna are

experienced lamenters and are both ‘performers’ of Karelian lament in stage settings, as well as lament workshop participants and lament workshop teachers. They shared with me a short impromptu lament performance during our tour of the Sibelius Academy<sup>45</sup>.

In the Finnish Folklore Society, I discovered that there are hordes of archival material about Karelian and Ingrian laments and surprisingly they had an old recording of an Irish lament, given to the Finnish Folklore society by Séamus Ó Duilearga, the first director of the Irish Folklore Commission when he visited the Finnish Literature Society in 1951. The discovery of this recording was very exciting, as it was complete with its Ediphone crackle. The familiar-accented voice of a woman singing one of the only three recorded keens that we have in Ireland came to me as I had never experienced it before in an eerie, sonically distorted form.

During this week I also witnessed a lamenters’ gathering, where seven lamenters and lament workshop teachers (or leaders, as Pirkko refers to them) came to Pirkko’s house one afternoon. I felt very privileged that so many people would come in the depths of Finnish winter to talk to me and to perform their laments for me. On the day that the lamenters were visiting, Pirkko and I were up early getting things ready, crockery was taken out for teas and coffees and the cakes and biscuits that we had bought together in the supermarket the day previously were displayed and there was an air of excitement about.

From about midday, people began to arrive. Everyone had big coats and boots on, as the snow was heavy on the ground outside and although temperatures had risen since the first few days of my visit (when it was -26°C), it was still around -10°C and with a fresh snowfall daily. As they arrived, Pirkko greeted each person warmly and they all hung up their own

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<sup>45</sup> Performances of lament by Emmi Kuittinen can be found on her website: <https://emmikuittinen.com/english>

coats in a familiar way that showed they had been here many times before. Everyone took off their shoes, putting on their big, knitted house socks which they had brought with them.<sup>46</sup> After teas and coffees and introductions, more or less everyone had arrived (with the exception of Tuomas and James (Jim) Wilce who were due later). There was some general chat about lament, and I introduced myself and my ideas and why I was curious about the Finnish lament revival. At this point, two people left as they were not taking part in the lamenting session.

Now everyone quietened down, and Hannele was the first to start her lament. She hummed and began to rock backwards and forwards with her hand up to the side of her face and began to cry and sing in Finnish while sighing loudly and becoming more and more tearful. Then she began to build up to a crescendo of loud and angry-sounding sobs for a few minutes and then eventually she came back to sighing and she finished her lament, dried her tears, and smiled. Later, I asked her what her lament was about, and she told me how she uses lament herself to relieve some trauma suffered by her in childhood. She said that lament helps her, along with other tools such as meditation and CBT, to deal with depression which she has suffered from for many years. She also told me about how she runs regular lament meetings with other people who also suffer with depression.

While Hannele had been sobbing, others in the group were also sighing, humming, weeping, and rocking along with her. When she finished, the next person who wanted to do their lament started, all the while the others kept a low level of humming and sobbing as a constant sound in the background. The lady who was sitting next to me then broke into her lament which was mostly about the environment, and after her, another lamenter began her

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<sup>46</sup> I discovered during this week that this is standard practice in houses and in general when indoors, even in the University where most people bring indoor shoes or socks with them, leaving big coats and boots in public reception areas.

lament (also about the environment), which she did while kneeling on the floor and sometimes banging it in anger and frustration. When it was my turn to lament, I found that I wasn't ready to cry, maybe it was because I was so intent on trying to record and ask questions or maybe it was because I still wasn't ready to let it all go in front of others and felt a little self-conscious. However, I did recite the lament which I had prepared in my classes with Pirkko. Finally, after everyone had finished their laments, Pirkko finished with a lament to her mother.

When I met Tuomas and the other lamenters that day, one of the things that I wrote in my field notes after conversations with both him and one of the 'environment' lamenters described above, is that they mention how there is always a sense of relief after being 'witnessed' in a lament workshop:

When you sing to someone or something, you are being witnessed.

When someone has seen your pain, you can let it go.

What I didn't realise back then in 2017, when hearing these testimonies for the first time, was how important the idea of 'being witnessed' in one's pain and trauma in a group situation would become as a constant feature of testimonials from my research collaborators both in Finland and later in Ireland. The bonds of trust formed through the power of witnessing and being witnessed in lament workshops appears to create very close ties between workshop participants, which I discuss further in Chapter 9 on Lasting Bonds: Communitas and Collective Emotion.

This bond between the group was very evident during my stay in Helsinki while observing and speaking to the lamenters who came to Pirkko's house. This group of people do not see each other regularly but there was such an obvious warm relationship between

them when they met again on this occasion. The people in this group have over the years shared many experiences of witnessing each other's personal traumas at these lament gatherings. As a result, they hold an unwavering confidence in the power of witnessed lamenting as a healing tool and they have formed very deep, trusting friendships with each other. Although we live in a world where 'kin' and community connections differ from those of the past, it was evident to me in Helsinki while speaking to the lamenters that a new kind of community bonding or 'kinship' is formed through being witnessed.

As mentioned previously, on the same day as meeting the lamenters and Tuomas Rounakari, I also met James (Jim) Wilce, an American scholar and the author of the study of lament that I was re-reading. Jim had visited Helsinki in 2008 for the same reason as me, to see what the lament 'revival' was about as part of his research for his book and he ended up staying for a year, and attending several lament workshops. Jim has been visiting Finland regularly ever since, both to attend lament workshops and also as an invited scholar. Jim is unique in that he is one of the few scholars of Karelian lament who has conducted ethnographic studies of Karelian lament in English (Wilce 2011, p. 572). In describing his research, Wilce tells us that apart from the ethnographic work of Karen Armstrong, 'English-language anthropological studies of Finland are quite rare' (Wilce, 2011b, p. 2). Meeting Jim during my trip, while re-reading his book on lament, had the effect of reinforcing my thinking about way that Irish keening might be reimagined as a modern healing tool.

## Conclusion

Through the presentation of my experiences in Finland, my participation in lament workshops, and my conversations with modern lamenters, I have shown that the reimagining of Karelian lament in Finland is regularly utilized as a ritual device to mark modern life events and that it has the effect of helping some of those who encounter it to navigate through the modern societal pressures and mental health issues. Whilst the Karelian lament of today

may be transmitted in a different way than it would have been in the past, it has been successfully reinvented and its overall function today lies in its efficacy as a tool to help people navigate, in a meaningful way, life's difficult times. In their approximately twenty-five years of running the lament workshops, the Finnish facilitators appear to have perfected and solidified a successful 'teaching' model which works by easing people into a space where they learn how to lament using improvisation as a composition tool, and which allows expression of their emotions in an environment free of shame or fear of censure. Karelian lament is serving a range of purposes suited to the modern world and I would argue, following Grimes (2000), that in its revival, it does indeed provide a means to ritualize modern 'rough passages' in life and it fills what for some is a void left vacant by religious institutional ritual processes.

The data gathered from my trip to Helsinki revealed that revived ritual customs, such as the Karelian lament focused on here, can serve very well as a modern healing modality. It shows that lament workshops like these offer a safe 'venting' space for feelings that are often very deeply hidden and allow people to transition through difficult periods in their lives. In this regard, I have illustrated how my informants and others have identified the efficacy of lament as an effective tool for their own psychological well-being and how the revival of an old and almost lost ritual has changed their lives.

I feel privileged to have been given an opportunity to learn the skill of lament composition by my research collaborators, and I now have a deep personal understanding of how it acts as a powerful tool of transformation and healing. Indeed, learning lament in this way in a 'well-being' and 'holistic healing' workshop setting has helped me to navigate some of my own 'rough passages'. In creating my own laments while in Helsinki and since, I discovered some surprising insights about myself, my personal thoughts and feelings, my relationship to my native language and the most important insight of all, that lament flowed

easily through my veins. Since I wrote words to this effect in my field notes about feeling that lament came very naturally to me, it was a great surprise to me to learn just recently that my great-grandmother on my father's side 'keened' at funeral wakes in Cork City. This is according to two of my octogenarian aunts who I was speaking to and when I mentioned my work, they told me that they remembered it from their childhood.

My experiences in Helsinki inspired me to consider how using a similar lament workshop model being used there, might be interesting to explore as a research tool in the context of Irish keening. In Chapter 7, I detail how this developed.

## Chapter 7: Re-Envisioning Irish Lament-Research Design

### Keening Workshops

I mentioned in Chapter 3 that one of my first inspirations for thinking about how keening might be useful as a contemporary therapeutic tool was taken from sociologist of religion Roger Grainger (1998), who had called for a revival of Irish keening as a therapeutic practice:

From my own work with bereaved people I am sure of one thing at least-- anything which seriously impedes the course of a bereaved person's grief-work can only delay his or her restoration to a reordered role in life. If the funeral wake is an effective way of promoting such restoration then we should perhaps be looking for opportunities to revive this custom or somehow reproduce its purposes and effects (Grainger, 1998, p. 140).

Being inspired by Grainger's idea and following my fieldwork experiences in Finland, where people communicated to me that they had come away from the *Äänellä Itkijät* workshops with feelings of a deep 'belonging' and of healing, I reflected on what it might be like as part of my research project to 'reimagine' Irish keening using the Finnish workshop model for this purpose. Some research questions emerged for me at this point which I felt would bring an interesting dataset to such a research project: Would the same workshop model work in Ireland similarly as a wellbeing tool? Would similar feelings of belonging, healing and relief reported by the Finnish lamenter emerge for Irish participants? With the permission of the Finnish workshop facilitators to 'transfer' their workshop model to the Irish context as part of my research and I set about planning the project.

Being fully aware that we will never fully understand how Irish keening was experienced and felt in the past, or how it sounded, this project was not an attempt to recreate keening as such, but to reimagine it. That said, I did wish for the information imparted to participants in the Irish workshops to be as 'authentic' as possible based on what we know of the keening tradition. I wanted to ensure that although it might be interesting to try out the

Finnish workshop model, any Irish workshop would still hold unique aspects of the keening tradition. Whilst I have not studied the structures of the Irish and Finish laments in detail and the cultural and social context were different for both lament traditions (albeit they were performed for similar occasions such as funerals and other instances of parting), what was interesting was that there seemed to be certain similarities in the structural features of Irish laments (Bourke, 1988; Ní Shíocháin, 2018) and the structure of Karelian lament (Fig1.). It seems that hey both praised the deceased, expressed shock and sadness at the loss, and communicated to the ancestors that the soul of the deceased was ‘crossing over’ and to prepare the way.

Figure 1. Comparative Structures

| Example Finnish Lament Structure<br>(as described to me by Pirkko Fihlman, in<br>person interview, Helsinki January 2017)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Irish Lament Structure<br>(Bourke, 1988)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– All the things we did together no longer</li> <li>– Come and see us as a bird or a flower, put some marks so that we know you</li> <li>– Talking to dead relatives to ask them to welcome the deceased</li> <li>– Advise dead person about the otherworld and who is waiting there to meet them</li> <li>– Poor wife, unhappy that you left</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Effect on the person/s left behind, expressed shock, sorrow at the loss</li> <li>– Recounted places they lived, worked, played, deeds, skills</li> <li>– Beseeched a return.... ‘come back to us!’</li> <li>– Traces and praises ancestry, honoured the <b>memory</b> of the deceased</li> <li>– Calling to the ancestors to prepare for the coming of the deceased</li> <li>– Highlighted the wrongdoings to the dead person, political issues (often personal to keener herself)</li> <li>– Effect on the community</li> <li>– Describing a life without the person</li> <li>– The pain of the loss</li> </ul> |

It can be seen here that the Karelian structure and the Irish one seem to have had some similar themes running through them:

- Sadness or Shock that the deceased is gone
- Recounting memories of and praise for the deceased
- Calling for the deceased to come back or to show themselves
- Speaking to the Ancestors to prepare the way

Whilst there is academic analysis of the keening tradition in Ireland as discussed in Chapter 3, the analysis is retrospective and deals with only the skeletal remains of something that existed in another time and social context. Even though we may only have these few certainties which are ‘residual elements of culture’ (Anttonen, 2005, p. 65) to bring with us into the future, the re-animation of history being considered here, as with the lament revival in Finland, is to be regarded a useful endeavour in relation to participants’ sense of belonging: ‘Listening to and for the past, by contrast, especially in the case of the distant, ancient past, takes both conscious work and active imagination’ (Butler & Nooter, 2019, p. 2). Such ‘imagining’ of the historical tradition keeps their relationship with history active and dynamic and continues an important dialogue with what is lost and with whatever remains (Eng & Kazanjian, 2013, p. 1). Reimagining the keening tradition keeps a connection to it alive, allowing keening workshop to foster that important sense of belonging to something important. It was important to focus the keening workshops specifically on the Irish lament tradition rather than the Karelian one. While both share similarities, the historical and societal contexts in which they were performed and the reasons why they were performed are markedly different as described in detail both on Chapters 3 and 5.

## Ritual Experimentation

While I was in Finland, as well as receiving ‘composition’ instruction from my lament teacher, Pirkko Fihlman, she had also given me step-by-step instructions on how to run a workshop. However, not being experienced in group facilitation, I realised that if this Finnish workshop model was to be trialled in Ireland, I needed to consider who might be a suitable person to undertake this specialised task. In seeking someone to assist me with the workshop organisation, I was reminded of Grimes’ (2000) consideration of the question of who today might be capable of making ritual in the contemporary world when there are no ‘elders’ passing on ritual skills as they would have done in the past. Having created and performed rituals himself for many years, Grimes suggests that the creation of contemporary rituals should be initially approached as if one is at beginner level in a creative ‘practice’ and suggests that starting with experimentation and improvisation is best. What emerges from this kind of experimentation is a ‘script’ or rules which can be set down afterwards: ‘If people simply have the intention to ritualize an event, and if they allow themselves to feel awkward or self-conscious, it is my experience that appropriate actions will present themselves’ (Grimes, 2000, p. 85).

This is how the revivalist group in Finland began, with Pirkko Fihlman and Tuomas Rounakari improvising and creating their own style of lament ‘practice’ and creating a method of teaching lament composition techniques as they went along. Grimes advises that when creating ritual, ‘an atmosphere conducive to making mistakes, feeling awkward, and venturing the untried is a prerequisite’ (Grimes, 2000, p. 85). Tuomas conveyed that, in his experience, lament composition works if it is allowed to unfold naturally and it ‘shows to you what is needed’. The Finnish creators took no official lament ‘lessons’ themselves, nor did they have a ‘handed down’ experience, but from their experimentation, they feel a very successful method and model of lament workshop has developed.

From what we know of keening practices in the past, there was an improvisational aspect in the oral eulogies and narratives, so the way in which I reimagined keening involved an improvised element in a similar way to the past but using the ‘compositional’ tools akin to the Finnish workshops. While the findings of Collins (2018) show that in recent times there has been experimentation with keening in Ireland in a neo-shamanic setting using vocal sounds, she did not report finding anyone running keening events involving improvised compositional techniques. This is why the Finnish workshop model was so appealing to me, as my own experience of those lament composition techniques had had a profound impact on me.

The next stage of the development of my research was to arrange some keening workshops. In seeking someone with a charismatic personality and who would have skills in working with improvisation, it occurred to me that I could ask Tuomas Rounakari or Pirkko Fihlman from the *Äänellä Itkijät* group to come over to Ireland and run an exploratory lament workshop. When I asked them, both expressed interest in doing this if I could organise it. There were various factors to consider, including financial ones, in bringing one or both of them to Ireland and I began to look into potential venues for such a workshop as well as how best to locate participants.

True to the experimental and improvisatory nature of the project so far, in early 2018 an email arrived from Tuomas to say he had been invited to run a weekend lament workshop in London and I seized the opportunity to suggest he come to Cork to run a workshop. He agreed that this would be a good time as he just so happened to have a free gap in between touring with his band. He was very enthusiastic to make the journey as he had never visited Ireland before. Over the following weeks, Tuomas and I put a plan together to pilot an experimental keening workshop and apply some of the well developed teaching tools from Finland in Ireland. Normally, the workshops run in Finland are spread over two days, but due

to time constraints for Ireland, we decided to experiment with a one-day workshop. Tuomas did advise that it would probably not take people as ‘deep’ as the usual two-day workshop, but he felt it was appropriate to try one day in the circumstances.

### [The Pilot Keening Workshop](#)

Having made the arrangements with Tuomas for the workshop, I booked a space to host it at University College Cork. It was also decided that we would run an afternoon of talks, on the day before the workshop as a precursor to the workshop. This was a separate event to the workshop and was by way of an information session for anyone who was interested in the topic. For this talk I invited two speakers who are authorities on the topic of keening in Ireland. One was Michelle Collins, who was involved in the most recent research on keening that I was aware of at the time. Michelle had published an article and made a radio documentary, broadcast on RTÉ in 2016, about what remnants of keening she had discovered during her research (Collins, 2018) and she had also curated a sound art exhibition in response to her research. I had a telephone conversation with Michelle in March 2018 and discussed this research idea with her and she was immediately on board with being involved. Michelle gave a talk at the seminar about her research, and she also decided to participate in the workshop the next day. Secondly, I approached Dr. Triona Ní Shíocháin, then a lecturer in University College Cork’s Music Department and an expert in the field of Irish oral culture, specialising in the analysis of Irish lament in the Irish language, who I had interviewed for my thesis project in February 2018. When I contacted her again and told her about the upcoming events at UCC, she agreed to give a talk at the pre-workshop seminar. Triona did not attend the lament workshop the next day.

I then contacted the people I had met when I had given a talk at the 2017 Critical Voices Network of Ireland (CVNI)<sup>47</sup> conference, who had expressed an interest in being contacted in relation to this research project to let them know about the upcoming workshop. The CVNI is described on their website as ‘a coalition of people with self-experience, survivors, supporters, practitioners, academics, and campaigning and advocacy groups, all interested in a mental health system based on choice, respect, dignity, non-coercion and principles of social justice’ and they organise an annual conference and other events that challenge psychiatric models of dealing with mental health. The organisers of the conference also agreed to circulate the workshop invitation (see Appendix 1) through their network. Additionally, I sent an email to the University College Cork staff email list about the workshop, as well as to other people who had expressed interest in my research. Almost immediately, a wave of enthusiastic email replies flooded in, and so much so, that a waiting list had to be set up for those who we couldn’t accommodate on the day.

I booked the first twelve people in by keeping a list of names on an Excel sheet and there were another sixteen people on the waiting list also kept on an Excel sheet. The fact that the workshop was free and open to all those interested could also have been an important factor in generating interest. Tuomas and I decided to ask for donations from participants as a way of contributing to his costs which he was covering himself, but to be clear that donations were not expected and if people could not afford it, that was alright, and they were still welcome to participate. Having the right number of people is important at a lament workshop. The workshops in Finland are usually limited to twelve or thirteen people and Rounakari advises: ‘If a group is too small, participants get too exposed. If the group is too

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<sup>47</sup> <https://cvni.ie/>

big, the time will not allow enough individual processing’. Tuomas, on hearing that there was so much interest in the workshop, advised to allow everyone to attend who wanted to come to the first part of the workshop, since so many were eager to experience it, but to allow only the core twelve people to stay for the ‘deeper’ work in the afternoon.

The seminar of talks took place on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2018 in a large seminar room G.27 of the O’Rahilly Building at University College Cork. The seminar began with my talk on the history of keening, outlining some of the reasons why it had died out. Michelle Collins followed by performing a beautiful rendition of one of the only three keening recordings in existence and giving a very interesting talk about her ethnographic research on finding traces of keening in Ireland. Triona Ní Shíocháin then gave an exciting talk about the richness of the keening tradition, the sophisticated structures of keens, and the improvisational skills of the women who performed them. I had previously interviewed Triona but at this talk what I found so interesting was the fact that at the wake was the space where women had an important voice; I don’t think I had a sense of that before this talk. I wrote in my fieldnotes:

For me the most important thing that I learnt that day was why it was so important and why the loss of it had silenced women’s ideas the crowd could be influenced by women’s words and opinion

Finally, Tuomas Rounakari spoke, in his engaging and inspirational manner, about the Karelian lament tradition, its history, its demise and its contemporary reinvention through the workshops taught by himself and Pirkko Fihlman. This afternoon was a great success, and we looked forward to the next day.

On 17<sup>th</sup> April 2018, in the same room, we had the keening workshop. Arriving at about 8.15am and on Tuomas’s instruction, we rearranged the chairs in the room into a circle, putting out enough seats for twenty people, allowing for the “first stage” participants. As the

room filled up, and people took their seats, an air of nervousness and expectation began to develop. I was very relieved when Tuomas began to take control as the information session the day before was my responsibility to organise and ensure that everything went smoothly. I wrote in my fieldnotes afterwards:

What a Day!! I relaxed completely this day because it was Tuomas who was in control (17/04/2018)

I introduced myself, explained my doctoral study, and offered some information about keening and its history. Michelle Collins who also attended, briefly spoke about her work and what remnants of the tradition exist today. I played the three historical recordings of keens, and I also played some newer audiovisual of popular lament ‘songs’ (some of those I mentioned in Chapter 6), and some examples of Karelian laments, both old and modern. Tuomas and I stressed again to the participants that this was an experimental workshop and that neither of us knew how it would work out and that they, as participants, were as much as part of the development of this idea as we were. It was also stressed that although we were taking inspiration from the Finnish project, we felt it appropriate that this pilot workshop would have very much an Irish flavour.

Tuomas led the workshop and began a meditation, advising that we should leave aside any thoughts and feelings that wouldn’t serve us that day.

Then he guided us gently through a series of vocal soundings such as loud yawning and sounding ‘ahhhs’ and ‘ooohs’ and loud sighs. We then moved onto general humming or murmuring and singing ‘silly songs’ about our morning, Tuomas beginning with his example of how he slept and how his morning went. Tuomas explained that there was no need to make our song tuneful and that in fact, the more out of tune it was, the better it was to get us to

relax and for us to become familiar with our own ‘ugly’ voice when it makes out-of-tune and guttural sounds.

In my earlier introductory talk, when I had played the older keens and some of the more modern popular laments, I had asked participants to think about whether any of the vocal motifs that they heard in the audio and video examples appealed to them as something that they might be able to base their new laments on, or to think about any other ideas for a sound that we could use together. The idea behind this was to try and emulate what had been described by scholars as something that the crowd did together at funerals in the ‘Gól’ section of the keen (as described in Chapter 3). The general consensus was that the motif of ‘Ochóne!’ which is sung at the end of each verse of a popular lament called *‘Caoineadh na dTrí Muire’*<sup>48</sup> (Lament of the Three Marys) that I had played for them earlier, was chosen. Two of the three historical recorded renditions of keening that I played where the ‘Ochóne’ motif also appeared, were sung by elderly women and were rather incoherent mutterings of Irish words with a very crackly and a fairly atonal ‘Ochóne’ punctuating the murmuring. Though this muttered version may in fact be closer to an ‘original’ sounding keen, the group was more interested in the more tuneful ‘Ochóne’ motif of the *‘Caoineadh na dTrí Muire’*. Once this tune was agreed on by all, Tuomas indicated to me to begin humming it, which was a bit daunting as I had not expected to lead any part of the workshop, and had not practiced it, but as the workshop was by nature experimental, I went along with it so that we could get started.

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<sup>48</sup> This tune has been recorded by several musicians with the earliest that I have found being a recording made by Joe Heaney in the late 1950’s. The origins of the song are thought to be a mixture of the keening tradition and Christian religious themes and began to appear in various forms in the early nineteenth century. This is discussed in more detail in Lysaght (1985).

Although I felt it was necessary to have some kind of a sound from an Irish keen to get the group started, I felt a little uncomfortable singing this particular motif because firstly, this version that we were using was from a tuneful song form rather than what I understood as atonal keening, and secondly, from the very limited information that we have about that part of the keen (called '*Gól*'), it seems that there would have been no actual recognisable tune involved. The most tuneful part of a keen apparently was the 'verse' section where the keening woman would eulogize about the deceased using parts of a well-known tune from the local area which everyone was likely familiar with (Wilce, 2009) and adding into it her own improvised narrative which she would take from stock phrases. This would result in a sort of 'hodge podge' of all that she knew and her making it relate to the context in which she found herself.

Observers of the wake rituals reported that a cacophonous eruption of wailing of the word '*Ochóne!*' would ensue as a sort of chorus once the keening woman had finished her verses (Wilce, 2009). It was also a slight concern for me that the song that we took the '*Ochóne*' motif from was religious in nature, having a strong Christian influence in being connected to the 'Passion of Christ' from the point of view of his mother Mary. I was concerned that people weren't fully aware of the religious nature of the song that we were taking the motif out of, and the fact that an earlier suggestion of a religious theme for a song for our workshop was rejected by the group. However, the part of the song that we chose to use was more associated with keening, a 'pagan' tradition, rather than Christian tradition. Also, I considered that religious narrative was often woven into later keens as part of the stock of phrases which the keening woman had in her repertoire, or which were handed down to her. This blending of a religious theme to a keen was in those times probably more acceptable to the Catholic authorities who frowned upon the keening custom (Lysaght, 1985). The fact that we had just simply pulled a motif from a modern song and started using it with

no context felt a bit contrived to me. That said, I had to remind myself that this endeavour was all very experimental in nature and with so few audio examples of what a keen actually sounded like in situ, it was necessary to ‘invent’ a little until people felt comfortable enough to start developing their own ‘soundings’.

Regardless of my reservations, I carried on singing the ‘Ochóne’ motif which had been decided on. After a while, most people began to fall in with this until almost everyone was sounding it in some form or other, and we just sang it over and over until the room naturally fell into silence again. At this point, Tuomas asked people to think about a song, story, or situation that makes them sad, and he looked around the room asking for volunteers. A few people including myself began to share our thoughts and gently, slowly the crying and sobs from some (including myself) came. I shared first why a certain song always made me cry. Again, on Tuomas’s intimation to me, I began to sing the ‘Ochóne’ tune while I cried. This time, it felt more genuine and fitting, and as a word that was vowel-heavy it lent itself very well to being sounded while crying and sobbing. After my turn, a few more people volunteered their stories of sad songs or poems which had most of the room in tears and all the while we continued to sing ‘Ochóne’ in-between the pauses. When eventually the various waves of crying around the room came to a natural pause, Tuomas led the group back into a more composed space with a meditation and we broke for coffee.

At this point, while everyone was out on a break, I laid out the ‘visual prompts’ around the floor, which were pictures I had cut from magazines. After the break, everyone came back and began to move around the room studying the pictures on the floor and occasionally picking up one or two. When everyone had chosen a few pictures and sat down again, Tuomas asked people to volunteer in telling the group why they had chosen the pictures they did. There was an uncomfortable silence for some while, so I decided to again be first to volunteer and explain my choice. Rather unexpectedly for me in this step, the tears came very quickly

as I began to speak, and loud sobs came out of me that I definitely had not anticipated. Between the tears and the sobs, I managed to explain why my chosen picture of a beautiful country kitchen brought up certain feelings for me, along with the reason why the song that I had been describing earlier, had also touched something sad within me, and why together they had brought up feelings about a sad time in my life that I thought I had long since dealt with.

Here I was reminded of what Tuomas and Pirkko had said to me when I was in Helsinki about how lament ‘uncovers layers’, and going through this experience in Cork again proved to me that this part of the composition process certainly had the ability to reach a place of sadness in my personal life that I hadn’t thought about for a long time, but where there was obviously still a remnant of it lurking quite deeply within me. After I shared this, a feeling of peace came over me and I was glad that those feelings had come to the surface and that I could revisit them with new tears and with years of space between the rawness of the original experience. It was good to revisit this part of my life. I wrote in my fieldnotes:

A piece of my jigsaw was floating around the place, and it was at that workshop that I found that piece and some peace for something I hadn't even thought was there. Lament went and found it and dragged it kicking and screaming out of my body, through my throat and I sobbed like I'd never done for that longing.

One by one, the others in the group began to share their reasons for choosing certain pictures and more tears and more sobbing came, both from the person speaking and from the rest of the group; the sadness of other peoples’ stories and their tears are somewhat infectious, almost like when laughing becomes infectious in a group. We continued singing ‘Ochóne!’ in between the speakers telling their stories. By this stage the ‘Ochóne’ came and went in waves and the group instinctively seemed to know when the moment felt right to start and stop. The constant repeating of ‘Ochóne!’ acted like a soothing hammock-like support, swinging from person to person, being picked up or dropped intuitively by the group when it

was needed. It felt like we were sounding as one entity, rather than being a room full of twenty separate people. We broke for lunch. At this stage, some people left, some because they had commitments elsewhere and others because they had only been booked for the morning session. However, some who were booked also for the afternoon session left because they were feeling uncomfortable. One of my informants who left at this stage, told me afterwards in a WhatsApp message (that they gave permission for me to include in my research) that they worried about going too deep;

I remember not taking part in the second half of the workshop and feeling physically sick at the time and to go any deeper would have been overwhelming for me. I felt I wasn't ready to continue (Interview Kerry, 1c April 2019).

By the time we came back to the room, there were fifteen people left, which was the number we originally envisaged as being ideal.

After lunch, starting into the “stage 2” workshop, Tuomas explained that the next step was to start to write down some ideas to compose something which we might feel comfortable enough by the end of the day to voice as a ‘mini lament’. As I mentioned earlier, Finnish workshops usually spread over two full days, with the first full day being where most of the preparation, processing, and thinking is done. There is usually time during breaks on both days and also in the evening (if it is a residential workshop), to go out and walk and use nature as inspiration for using the tools of metaphor and allegory as a compositional aid.

As mentioned in Chapter 5 this is what the Finns call ‘lament language’, which can involve alliteration, metaphor and allegory to express oneself. As previously described in my first lament in Helsinki, I found this helpful in transferring my feelings to an inanimate object where I imagined myself as a field speaking to Mother Nature about my sorrow in being destroyed by pesticides and having no flowers or diversity. In my lament at the Cork

workshop, I transferred my ‘positionality’ from myself as the person lamenting about a time where I had to leave a house that I loved (all the sorrow and insecurity I had associated with that), to imagining myself as the house. My lament was then written from the point of view of the house observing me leaving. In my fieldnotes I wrote:

The picture prompts gave me a lament from the house and kitchen I always wanted. It told me that it grieved for my dream of the life within its walls. It told me: ‘I knew your dream’ and just to have that realised was huge for me!

In using metaphor like this, you are imagining yourself as an object that is lamenting instead of speaking as yourself, or you can use an inanimate object to describe the pain felt or the traumatic situation, which might be the subject of the lament. This technique is also traditionally used in Karelian lament to avoid naming a person directly, as I’ve discussed in Chapter 5. This technique helps to overcome the difficulty of expressing the actual words to describe a situation, which for some people might be too painful to express. Someone could be de-sensitized or have a negative association with those words, especially if they have used them in talking therapy. As I’ve detailed previously in relation to the modern Finnish workshops, using metaphorical language allows people to transcend this verbal barrier which can keep people closed.

We already had gone through a morning of being eased gently into a state where Tuomas was confident that everyone would be comfortable enough to start the ‘deeper work’. It was time for people to start writing down their thoughts in a ‘free writing’ exercise. Tuomas then asked us to go back over what we had written and pull out one or two lines, which might encompass the sentiment of what we had written. The main objective here was to ensure that everyone experienced the feeling of what it was like to really ‘lament’, albeit in a small way. Being an experienced lament workshop leader, Tuomas knew that with the number of people that we had in the group, and the short amount of time available, all we would realistically

be able to accomplish by the end of the day were one or two lines of lament, so he was eager to ensure that everyone in the group was given an opportunity to see the whole process through, even if only in a micro form. Now that I have attended two full weekend workshops since this shorter pilot, I better understand why it is important to have more time for composition and processing. Building up to being able to put ideas together for a whole lament so that everything that you need to say is explored, and all the feelings around it are expulsed, does take two days, particularly for those who may not have experienced the process.<sup>49</sup>

After some time writing their one or two lines, Tuomas asked the group to start sharing and while we were waiting for people to start, he indicated to me once again to start the ‘Ochóne!’, which people fell very comfortably into, murmuring and humming their own version of it, along with me. This time around singing this felt natural, supportive, and what I can only describe as caressing. No one seemed worried about trying to stay in tune nor concerned with what it sounded like. At times it became a cacophony of indistinct sobbing and humming sounds with the vague ‘Ochóne’ tune still running through it and, one by one, people began to cry, sob or sing their stories. Some people literally had only one line to say, which meant nothing to the rest of the group, but which sent them into convulsions of sobs and wails with everyone else crying and sobbing with them and sounding ‘Ochóne!’ or humming with them while they sobbed.

At some points with this loud cacophony of noise, it seemed like we had become one sounding entity of humming, crying, wailing, sobbing, and shouting. This was a phenomenon

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<sup>49</sup> I have attended several shorter lament sessions with some experienced lamenters that I met at these weekend workshops, and these have been successful because the participants already know what is involved and it takes less time to get to the deeper work.

that was also reported in Collins (2018) where she attended a ‘neo-shamanic’ style keening gathering:

‘The mass of sounds move from individual soundings to group sounding as one and back again. The distinction between the individual and the group blurs [...] We are a group with one voice again for a moment, the distinction between self and other, between private and public, between interior and exterior dissolving’ (Collins, 2018, p. 34)

The humming of the ‘Ochóne!’ in between people’s short lines of sobbed words full of regret, sadness, hurt, and grief functioned as a kind of a support mechanism which held us and soothed us. On a few occasions, I was conscious that we were very loud, and as the person responsible for the booking of the room, I hoped there wouldn’t be complaints from the people in offices or classrooms above and next to us!

Once everyone had shared their mini lament, the room quietened down, and it was time for the workshop to end. We were teary-eyed and physically and emotionally exhausted but there was a powerful sense of peace and calm and lots of smiling faces. To close the workshop, Tuomas in his expert way, brought everyone ‘back’ to the present world with a beautiful meditation. It was a very special and powerful experience for me personally and other participants said something similar as we were leaving.

### [The Weekend Workshop](#)

After this one-day pilot workshop, it was obvious from the feedback that there was an appetite for a longer weekend workshop, and I wished to gather more data in the Irish context. I also wanted to be able realise a fuller picture of the Finnish workshop model transplanted into an Irish cultural milieu. However, having been involved in the organisation of the one-day pilot event and knowing the time that it took, I knew that I did not have the time to organise a weekend event myself. Also, I wanted to ensure that future workshops would involve me more as a researcher rather than an organiser or facilitator. I felt it was important to bring

Tuomas back to facilitate a weekend workshop, but the organisation of this needed to be taken on by someone else, preferably who was already based in Ireland. I reflected on this later in my diary notes:

The level of prep and organisation for a weekend retreat is huge and financially a huge burden and stress (16/15/19)

In November 2018, again in a serendipitous way, I met the person who was to become the organiser of the Keening Workshop Weekend Retreat, Tanya Bryan.

I met Tanya in the unfolding of a set of unexpected but fortuitous circumstances which brought us together. During the summer and autumn period since the pilot workshop not an awful lot had happened regarding plans to develop a longer weekend retreat, however in November 2018, I broke my wrist and since I needed help at home with driving and cooking etc., I called on HelpX which is an organisation that matches up people needing help around the house and garden, with other people who are seeking temporary accommodation in exchange for that help. Tanya contacted me and we arranged for her to live with me and help until my wrist was healed. I will never forget how much of an ‘angel’ that Tanya was to me personally at this time, and she became so important to this research project. Tanya, a qualified integrative psychotherapist with many years of experience and practice, became interested in the idea of a ‘reimagining keening’ project and it so happened that at the time she was in the process of setting up her new wellbeing event company, ‘A Time to Gather’, and was seeking out projects for her first commercially run event. With her enthusiasm for the idea, her experience, and having previous experience in organising weekend wellbeing retreats, I felt she was the perfect person to organise the weekend-long keening workshop. I wrote in my diary notes at the time:

Help came from the Universe, Tanya is like the Universe

Between January and April 2019, we planned a two-day event based on the advice and directions given to us from the Finnish lament teachers on how to run a weekend lament workshop. Tanya, drawing on her professional experience, believed it was essential to give participants in such a workshop filled with emotional weight, a beautiful, caring and wholesome experience including food and board, and for it to be held in a special venue. In her search for a suitable venue, she found a suitable rental property for events in Bantry, Co. Cork, which could accommodate up to 16 people which seemed like an idyllic location, set in a valley surrounded by hills and mountains. Tanya contacted Tuomas to invite him to facilitate the weekend and to ask about his availability and a date was set. Tanya began to ‘crunch the numbers’<sup>50</sup> so that the venture would work financially for her as a business, and she began to launch the marketing campaign, with the help of a friend of hers.<sup>51</sup> The ‘Keening Workshops’ Facebook and Twitter pages were set up at this point and Tanya set up the booking system. It was not long before people began to make enquiries, and potential participants were ‘interviewed’ over the phone with Tanya so that we had what she felt was the right ‘mix’ of people for the group workshop.

All participants were informed during that interview that the workshop was being run as part of my PhD project and that I would be participating as a researcher and featuring as a speaker providing a brief background of the history of keening and the development of the idea as my research project. As explained in my Methodology chapter, the workshop participants were informed in advance that the workshop formed part of a research project

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<sup>50</sup> Tanya handled the financial side of things, but from what I know there was a fee for the workshop, inclusive of meals, and some participants paid for accommodation whereas some stayed in camper vans outside the location and so paid less. Some paid a reduced cost according to means.

<sup>51</sup> It should be noted that Tanya exists very much in an exchange economy where she and the network of people that she knows offer ‘service’ exchanges to each other in various ways (and that network now includes me!), so she was able to get help with the marketing of the workshop from a person in her network who has this expertise.

and by participating they were taking part in the research and that, additionally, they had the option of being contacted by me after the workshop to be interviewed as part of my research project. As a researcher, the development of this workshop was very exciting, and on a personal level, I was looking forward to having an opportunity to experience a full weekend of lament workshop and to develop my lament composition skills. Confident that Tanya was completely in charge of this event, I had no more involvement in the organisation except to check on the social media pages and direct any queries about the workshop to Tanya.

### Keening Weekend Workshop Retreat

At the retreat centre in Bantry, West Cork from 26<sup>th</sup> until 28<sup>th</sup> April 2019, 19 people including me and two facilitators gathered together. The people's ages ranged from 35 to 79, with 4 male and 15 female participants.

### First Night

We arrived at the rural retreat location as a heavy rainstorm was hitting the West Cork coast, and while the location was beautiful, it was in an elevated position in a valley surrounded by hills and mountains and there was a threat that the power might fail at any time. Tanya and Tuomas had arrived first, and I arrived a short time later. I wrote in my diary at the time:

Got to (location) very stressed by seat of pants and just before the storm drove into Ireland. Met Tanya and Tuomas. Tanya very stressed and Tuomas tired from 12hr travelling from Helsinki. They had the running order of the weekend already planned out so I just helped to unpack the shopping and started cooking the omelettes, prepping salad etc, for supper

Tuomas had been outside gathering some things for the 'altar' which was to represent the four elements<sup>52</sup> and were represented as follows:

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<sup>52</sup> The four elements are also commonly used in altars and ritual settings in contemporary Paganism (see Butler 2004).

Earth - Flower, Moss

Wind - Feather

Fire - Candle

Water – Bowl of Water

This altar was situated in the centre of the circle and became also a place for people to add important symbols to over the weekend. Tanya and I began to unload the food that she had brought for the weekend while she set about allocating the rooms for the participants who were gradually beginning to arrive. Tanya had booked a caterer for the next day's lunch and evening supper but on this first night, some food had to be served as she had included that in the price. I was put in charge of cooking omelettes and making a salad for supper. I had not had prior communication with the other participants and as people were arriving, they were looking for Tanya and seemed to see me as simply another participant, although it was obvious that I was some part of the organising team since I was cooking. Tanya had also engaged the assistance of a friend of hers, 'Jenny' for the weekend whose role it was to support Tanya as a 'house mother' type figure, who dealt with all the housekeeping duties. Although she was not part of the workshop participant 'circle' as such, as the weekend progressed it was evident that she was an experienced 'ritual maker' herself and had, like the others in the group, taken part in and led many 'spiritual'/wellbeing types of events. She was a kind and 'wise' presence within the group, who understood the event's purpose, and was an important cog in the smooth running of the weekend.

It grew dark, which at this time of the year is around 6pm in Ireland, and the storm was really raging by now. Most of the participants had arrived and were milling around the main cottage part of the venue and a bit of nervous tension was beginning to creep into the atmosphere for the participants. For me, a feeling of apprehension and worry that we could

pull this off was beginning to set in, but I was relieved that I was not involved in any of the organisation and that I was there for the same reason as everyone else, to participate. I wrote in my diary later that night:

I was so relieved that I wasn't Tuomas or Tanya, he having to hold that space for so many people and she holding the responsibility of everything running smoothly at the venue

Added to this my young teenage daughter (who was being looked after by a good friend for the weekend back at home in Cork) had rung me and was upset because she was frightened of the thunder and lightning and the electricity was going on and off in the house. At that stage, if I could have jumped in my car and just gone home and not done this weekend, I would have. I wrote in my fieldnotes that night:

...how the hell can I concentrate on all of the work that I know is to come, I'm worried about home, and feeling completely unworthy as an 'adviser' or 'co-facilitator' in this group of strong personalities, most of whom had done loads of these kinds of workshops before and had probably organised a few, so how the hell are we going to pull this off!

As the storm continued raging, we were all shown our rooms finally, and then once everyone had a chance to settle in, we assembled at the long table in the kitchen to have our first supper together. There was a feeling of nervousness and anticipation amongst the participants about what was to happen for the next two days as, except for Tuomas and I, none of the participants had ever attended a lament event before. We knew what we were doing was completely new in an Irish context, being invented as it happened in every moment.

Supper was a quiet affair with nineteen people, mostly strangers to one another except for Tuomas, Tanya, her assistant and I, having light conversations but still a sense of

nervousness prevailed. After we had finished supper, Tuomas introduced himself to the group and announced that we were going to have an introductory ceremony in what the venue calls the ‘Sky Room’, which was our main gathering space for the weekend. At this point, Tuomas suggested that in order for us to prepare to enter this ‘sacred’ space for the weekend, we should have a smoke ritual to ‘cleansed’ us. As he did in the pilot day at UCC, he suggested that we leave anything ‘not serving us’ behind for the weekend. He lit a sage bunch and one by one we walked through the smoke on our way out into the stormy night and up to the Sky Room in the attached building. The wind was still howling, and the smoke was swirling about, but it felt sacred, and it felt special.

### New Rituals Created

A constant feature throughout the various keening workshops that I have attended was the symbolic ritualizing around the central ‘altar’ space with the air, water, fire and earth representations as the central focus. People creatively used that space to invent personalised mini rituals, adding tokens and symbols. The mountain that we could see from the window, who was being referred to metaphorically as ‘our mother’, who was looking over the workshop, was referred to in people’s laments and in people’s verbalized hopes and wishes. At one point, someone suggested that we could let our tears drop into a bowl which was our ‘water’ element representation for the weekend in the altar area. The idea around this was that at the end of the weekend we would release the water in the little stream behind the house, and it would carry our tears, and therefore our sorrows and grief and anger, away.

At one of the other workshops that I attended, something similar happened when someone brought a piece of pottery which was designated for the weekend as the ‘tear cup’ so that when people were crying, they would let their tears flow into the cup and, again, the idea was to release the tears into the river at the end of the weekend. In that same workshop where someone brought the tear cup, there was a participant who used performance and

ritualized storytelling and used a puppet she had made. This, and many other such instances at other workshops that I have attended where symbolic ‘transference’ was observed, clearly demonstrated to me the efficacy of ‘symbolic action’, and the role of ritualization and rituals in creating a world, even if there is no objective or scientific explanation of how this happens (Strauss, 1963).

Jan Berry (2009) proposes that women are more inclined to mark transitory periods in their lives by devising and creating new rituals in situations where there are no rituals which exist for their lived experiences. According to Berry, they create rituals for themselves and if they can be attributed as ‘ancient’ or ‘authentic’, even better. So often, in order to try and connect with old ritual practices, those who like to make ritual in the contemporary world often borrow parts of rituals from other cultures. The use of ‘smudge sticks’ for instance to ‘clear’ a space is common, as is drumming, meditations, native American shakers, Buddhist gongs and singing bowls. This kind of ritual-making and usage of space and symbols is hardly ever formulaic, nor regularly repeated but more often than not are ‘one off events that are playful and experimental’ (Berry, 2009, p. 4). Berry tells us that these rituals often draw on a similar pool of resources, but what is the most significant, even more than the enactment of the ritual itself, is the process to be able to plan and create their own:

Although some rituals are solitary, most are performed communally, either relating to a shared experience, or allowing an individual to express and negotiate her own experience in the company of others who support and care (Berry, 2009, p. 3).

The situation of ritual-making in an atmosphere of support and care described by Berry is much like my experience of the keening retreat weekend workshop.

## Ritual Specialist and Ritual Making a World

Most rituals are in the framework of some kind of religious or spiritual belief and so provide a wider context of meaning for the individual's journey or narrative (Berry, 2009, p. 3).

Whilst as Grimes (2000) tells us, there is an appetite for 'ritual making' in the contemporary world, the traditional means of transmission of ritual practices, and the embodied knowledge about how to create and perform those rituals, has been lost to most people living in contemporary society. Because of this lack of ritual knowledge and the shortage of ritual specialists to actually perform the rituals, many newly fashioned 'ritual specialists' have appeared, and ritual artefacts both material and immaterial are sourced from other cultures. At the keening retreat, it was evident that Tuomas was our ritual 'specialist' i.e., the person who led the various rituals that had been planned by himself and Tanya for the weekend. In observing Tuomas, in this role, it was obvious that he was a very experienced conductor of ritual and that he was able to make an atmosphere shift from a mundane space to a sacred one. It was evident that he was confident and familiar with holding emotionally laden spaces. I was in awe of how he exuded authority in this quite tense situation. He was also the person who gave permission to participants to cry and 'let go'; as I wrote in my fieldnotes:

There was a nervousness about our personal laments, I spoke to Tuomas and he gave me permission to let go, he felt the group was strong enough to hold that space.

Observing the smoke ceremony that Tuomas 'cleansed' us with on the first night of our weekend retreat, I had complete trust and faith in the intent of the smoke ritual and the 'authority' of Tuomas and the cleansing power of the smoke that he waved over us. I truly believed that by the power of his words and actions, and the properties of the smoke, we were entering a 'sacred' room, which he had prepared as our ritual home for the weekend, 'cleansed' of our everyday trials and tribulations. By the words and actions of Tuomas we

understood that we were entering into a 'liminal' space, from which at the end of the weekend we would re-emerge, forever changed. I made note of this in my diary that night:

Tuomas had lit a smudge stick and wanted everyone to have a cleanse in the smoke and that anything not serving us was to be left behind [...] because he SAID (my emphasis in my notes) it was to cleanse away the past, the word, the troubles, it FELT special, it felt sacred and was treated very much so by everyone. We all believed that Tuomas and the smoke and the intent was cleansing us

After the smoke ritual, we convened upstairs and made ourselves comfortable on the chairs and cushions that had been arranged in a circle. Some people preferred the floor, and some opted for chairs.<sup>53</sup> Tuomas again took control and said a few words about how the weekend would unfold. Tanya said a few words about timekeeping and sticking to the written agenda that she distributed. Tuomas then requested that we stand together in a circle, and he led us in a communal song he said was called 'Behold Me'. Again, this felt very special and sacred and seemed to have the effect of breaking down any tension that had been evident in the kitchen previously. In the gentle singing of this song, people began to soften, looks and smiles were exchanged, and people began to breathe loud sighs of bodily and emotional relief.

After this song we sat down again and one by one we went around the room to introduce ourselves and to tell the rest of the group why we were there. I reminded the group of my research project being my primary reason for being there. We were directed to add any symbols or items that held significance for us to the altar area in the middle of the room and to briefly explain why it was important to us. Most people added something, but in my rush to get there and the stress of the lead up to the event, I didn't have time to think about what I might bring, so I did not have something symbolically important to add to the altar. I was

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<sup>53</sup> Throughout the weekend, we all moved into different seats and sat, crouched and lay in different positions when we reconvened after breaks.

slightly worried that I didn't have anything to bring to this lament workshop emotionally either. In the two workshops that I had already attended, I had shed many tears about certain traumatic parts of my life and had made peace with those things that had surfaced for me during those sessions. I was worried that if I didn't have something 'heavy' to offload this weekend, I would not be seen by the others as being honest or authentic. I reflected on this at the time in my diary notes:

With Tanya organising and Tuomas facilitating, I didn't think I had much to contribute. I think this more reflected my own personal stresses going on with regards to my own life

During this first introductory evening the atmosphere was already feeling quite 'heavy' with a few people beginning to share the kinds of life stories and traumatic experiences which had led them to seek out this workshop. Listening to the stories that night from eighteen others bringing with them various levels of grief, trauma, and sadness, and remembering how long it took us in the pilot workshop to get through everyone's short two-line laments, I realized we were in for the 'long haul' this weekend of very deep work. People composed laments which touched on many themes such as;

- Grief
- Loss
- Relationships/heartbreak
- Miscarriage and infertility
- Child death
- Difficult family relations
- Parent emotionally unavailable
- Inability to connect with children
- Hurt child
- Invisible child
- Childhood abuse

- Children moving away
- Longing to belong
- Worry
- Shame
- Anger at neighbour
- Homesick
- Environment/climate change/destruction

As the evening ceremony in the Sky Room came to an end, I felt that there was already a bonding, a softening and a trust forming between the group. We went to bed early with instructions from Tanya about timetabling for the next day. I was so glad that I didn't have to worry about anything else this weekend, except turning up and taking part in the workshop.

## Day 1

The order of the workshop followed a similar order to the first pilot workshop, where, after a short talk by Tuomas and another group singing of 'Behold Me', I gave a short talk about the history of keening and how I found inspiration in the Finnish reinvention of the Karelian lament. I described how this workshop was something that we were creating together and whilst we were calling it 'keening', it was quite removed from what we understood of the older tradition and that from a sound recording perspective, we had very little to work with in as far as trying to emulate it in some way. I described my experience of learning to compose lament in Finland and also how using the Irish language helped me to release my emotions in my lament on the environment. I felt that this was important to mention as it demonstrated how reimagining keening at these workshops was very much being explored as an Irish cultural endeavour, even though we were using a Finnish workshop model. It was also important to demonstrate my own experience of the power of using the Irish language for my laments when I had not originally intended to as I thought that this might encourage others

to consider doing their laments in Irish, if they wished to. I showed some videos that I had taken of the lamenters gathering in Pirkko's house (as described in Chapter 5) and which I had permission from them to use for this purpose and played some of the recordings that I had played in the pilot workshop.

Tuomas then took over with the sounding exercises similar to that described already in the pilot, the silly songs, the yawning, and so on. The rest of the day was taken up with writing exercises, doing a sounding exercise in the garden, and creating a mini-lament to share by the end of the day. This involved going around the room as we had in the pilot workshop with everyone sharing, crying, loudly wailing, sobbing, singing or just speaking their stories. Sometimes we sang 'Ochóne' if people wanted it to start them off. People took symbols from the altar and talked or cried about what these meant to them. With so many people to get around, it took a very long time, and it was quite late when we finished. In the evening, we all went back to our rooms to freshen up and came back together in the kitchen to have dinner. Whilst everyone seemed exhausted both physically and mentally, there was an air of release and calm.

## Day 2

On the second day, we had breakfast and started much as we had the day before, making sound together, singing 'Behold Me' and singing the silly songs or talking about how we were feeling about what had come up for us the day before. Mostly people were quiet and pensive, but the atmosphere was pleasant, and people were chatting and sipping their drinks of tea, coffee or water (there was a no-alcohol rule at this workshop). It was a very supportive space, and it was obvious that a deep trust had begun to form between us. A huge amount of sharing and witnessing had already happened in the sessions since Friday and the main purpose of today was to write a full lament based on what had come up for us the day before and what thoughts, feelings and dreams had been developing overnight. Throughout the day,

everyone worked on composing their lament with the afternoon completely devoted to listening to each other's laments.

The experience of this day and the stories being told about traumas, heartbreak, loneliness, and grief was extremely powerful. We exposed our deepest vulnerabilities to each other and witnessed each other in an environment that felt to me to be safe and loving. All shades of human emotion that we experienced together as well as the healing, the support and respect and love for fellow humans found in this space, is something that will certainly stay with me for a very long time. This seemed to be the general feeling from all of the participants as we finally ended the day. I learned how others felt about the workshop by way of the interviews I conducted afterwards, as well as from the subsequent meetups that some of us have had together as a group where we have further explored keening as a tool for healing. Everyone I was in touch with following the weekend retreat told me that this workshop had a profound effect on them.

### My laments

On the first day, my mini lament had been partly about my own marginalization and struggle against the 'machine' as a parent, battling against the expectation of society that I should be 'contributing' to the economy instead of parenting, and being punished financially for making that choice. I had not intended to go down this route in a lament, and as I mentioned earlier, I thought I would be struggling to create a lament this time. Once again, the words of the Finnish lament teachers about how lament uncovers layers came to mind. It is my experience that somehow in this process things that are buried quite a way down in one's psyche come bubbling up, whether you want them to or not.

What prompted this lament for me was firstly the pictures that I had chosen from the selection on floor before we all went out into the garden for a break and to think about the

subject our laments and as a writing exercise to start putting some rough words and ideas together. One picture was of an indigenous person in traditional dress (possibly in South America) looking at a digger destroying the forest and the second picture was of a family looking happy.

While we were in the garden I wrote in my notebook about the pictures:

Injustice of a local man (he pays)

Happy family – all so ‘happy’ consuming (they rule, they enforce)

During this exercise I was further inspired by the giant ‘Gunnera’ plant in the shrub border which to me represented the big dark capitalist ‘system’ that we all live under in the contemporary world. Beneath that overpowering, quite aggressive-looking plant, grew a thick carpet of ground cover plants underneath, their root systems gnarled and strong, to ensure that no unwanted weeds would grow through. This represented to me the ‘officialdom’ which operates within the capitalist system. On the edge of the border, there was a plant called ‘Herb Robert’, which, although fragile looking, is a very persistent little plant considered a ‘weed’ with a beautiful pink flower that is reported to have powerful healing properties. A little flower was trying to emerge, but it was being choked by the ground cover plants. All of this seemed to represent my own situation and the situation of many people around the world who were the custodians and healers of life and the earth (such as indigenous peoples), being encroached upon by the capitalist system. So, my mini lament focused on this theme, using the metaphor of the plants for much of the lament rather than directly addressing my own situation. I wrote in my notes:

Can’t exist the way that I want as a mother and as a healer because of these big bastards invading my life

I also wrote:

They enforce/people consume  
We obey  
He pays (the indigenous man)  
I pay (my mental health, my daughter)

My bigger lament on the second day was again about motherhood but something which came from within me about the Irish ‘Mother and Baby Homes’, I am not sure why this subject came to me but when I looked at some of my fieldnotes from when the Pilot workshop was being organised, I had written:

an email from an interested participant says that we should lament the babies in Tuam and Besborough graves

So, it was already something that had been in my sphere of thinking and it was also probably because the Tuam Babies scandal had been in the news recently<sup>54</sup>. I sang and cried, imagining myself as one of the mothers who had to give up their children. I composed quite a bit of this lament using Irish words that I could remember for ‘small baby’, ‘mother’, ‘sad mother’, ‘I’m sorry’, ‘my broken heart’, and so on. Again, I found that the use of the Irish words was extremely powerful as I had the day before, and in my lamenting in Finland.

### Use of the Irish language

Irish was a dreaded subject for me back in my school days as it was a subject that I struggled with, and it was ‘drummed into us,’ as we say in Ireland, or taught in a forceful and austere way. It wasn’t spoken in my friend or family groups or anywhere outside of school. After many years of not speaking Irish, the utilisation of Irish words at the workshops had been

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<sup>54</sup> The bodies of up to 800 babies and children had recently been found in a septic tank in the grounds of an old Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, Co. Galway and there was talk that there were possibly more graves in other homes around the country, Bessborough House also in Co. Cork being also pointed at.

such a powerful tool for me, which helped me to shift into that emotional gear that I initially found difficult doing my first lament in Helsinki. Even when I became more experienced with lament composition and performance, I loved using the Irish words, but I continued to be frustrated by not knowing the grammar and syntax. I tried to weave some of my smatterings of Irish into my laments and even that minimal use felt powerful. I did not mind showing my incompetence with the language amongst the close groups that I lamented with, but if I was to, for instance ‘perform’ one of my laments, I would be mortified if there were any Irish language speakers there. I was expecting some more reference to the power of lamenting in Irish to show up in the data collected as an important element, but it did not feature as much as aspects like the feeling of belonging and ‘collective vibration’, which I discuss in Chapter 8 and Chapter 10. This is because not all the people around 40 across the different Irish workshops, were interviewed, so I did not ascertain everyone’s experience with regard to how language use affected them.

Some people lamented completely in English, even though they were Irish. One of the participants relayed a theory that our workshop leader had about this:

Some people didn’t speak in mother tongue at all, Tuomas suspected it might be too painful (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

For some the use of Irish was helpful, but it was not the principal thing that had an effect on them. One participant in the workshop commented that it definitely helped to soften words and phrases. Some of participants who were English, or of English descent living in Ireland, referred to efforts to find their ‘cultural voice’ by the use of the Irish language, which I found to be an interesting perspective, and they found it a very powerful experience.

For others, especially Irish-born people, and I include myself in this, there is a real shame in not being able to speak the Irish language. I found that being allowed to try to speak

it definitely heightened my experience, it definitely loosened up some initial blockages to expression and then when I really got into it, some of the words and phrases felt very forceful and powerful. Phrases such as '*tá mo chroí briste*' which translates as 'I am heartbroken', and also the phrase '*tá brón orm*' which literally means 'there is sorrow on me' translates as 'I am sorry'. When I was lamenting for the Tuam babies, the Irish word for 'little baby' which I put as '*bábín beag*'<sup>55</sup> the sheer power of that phrase and the Irish words for mother and father are, for some unidentifiable reason, just so powerful for me. I feel that it is only if you were brought up speaking the Irish language that this meaning and nuance could be understood. Those words in English just do not have the same power for me. In my field notes, I described it as something that felt 'innate', and something 'remembered' deep down and in my 'core' as an Irish person. I reflected further on this in my fieldnotes:

Many Irish people feel shame about not being able to speak the Irish language so even the use of a few words connects them to the past and the past where this tradition existed.

The process of creating our laments was an incredibly creative process, allowing people complete freedom to mix this creativity with their deepest emotions and traumas. One of the participants said that: 'it allowed space to tell the story and 're-story'. The 're-storying' for them of a previously traumatic time of their life meant that now, when they look back at that time, it is framed in a new way, which was really healing for them. Whenever I engage with lament, I like to use the tool of metaphor which, as I've explained above, is a feature of the Finnish workshop model that we tried in the Irish workshops. I wrote down the bulk of my laments as I didn't feel brave enough to do a lament without that 'crutch'. I was not as brave as some of the participants that I have witnessed who never wrote anything down and

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<sup>55</sup> I am aware that this may not be the correct way to frame 'little baby' in Irish but with my limited vocabulary, it was the only way I could express it.

just let it all pour out spontaneously. When I engage in the experimental, metaphorical writing, I find it extremely cathartic, and it offers me a deep creative space to soak in and explore some of my deepest feelings for my laments.

An initial concern I had about writing down my laments was the fact that most lamentations were orally performed and that writing them down seemed to not fully be in the spirit of an improvised oral lament. However, I embraced the compositional tools of the lament workshops in a way that felt comfortable for me.

## Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how, in heeding the advice of Pierre Bourdieu (1991) to allow one's field to make itself known naturally. Rather than going into research with too much of a fixed pre-determined plan, my research design allowed me to create a space for myself as a researcher for experimentation and improvisation. The characteristic of experimentation and improvisation that is evident in keening (as it was practiced in its heyday) was mirrored in my planning of research design, which in ways could be described as improvisational. In the end this worked very well and allowed that field to emerge on its own with the help of some nudging from me and the unfolding of fortuitous circumstances.

## **Chapter 8: Collective Belonging**

In previous chapters, I discussed the feelings and perceptions of lament workshop participants and the healing effects of ‘belonging’ that they described, and that they attributed to being part of that group workshop experience. Keening, as it was being reimagined within the ‘safe space’ of these workshops, was used by participants to express emotion and by emoting to the group, and as part of the group, a sense of belonging and group dynamics was established. This chapter discusses some of the other feelings that emerged for workshop participants around the history of the keening tradition after they gained more knowledge about historical keening, and where they had opportunity to explore their own cultural links to the tradition.

Such links and connections to the past offered, for some, a mechanism by which they could cultivate a sense of belonging to cultural history and place and to a shared cultural heritage. For some workshop participants, that connection to Ireland’s cultural past also included a feeling of belonging to a historically traumatised nation, a lost language, forgotten ancestry, and lost traditions. All these factors are important to include for analysis because they were all part of the whole healing process reported by participants.

Some of the workshop participants expressed their feelings about the fact that keening has been obscured and stigmatized for several centuries (for the reasons explained in Chapter 3). Some of the group, the women in particular, conveyed thoughts about this reimagining venture, stating that as individuals and as a group we had a ‘responsibility’ to be the contemporary ‘bearers’ and protectors of the keening tradition. One woman spoke about how, as she sees it, each generation “banks the trauma” if they don’t have traditions like this as tools to relieve themselves of that trauma.

Calling on the perceived wisdom of their elders, some workshop participants reported feeling a strong ‘connection’ to this old ritual tradition of keening and looked forward to the possibility of reworking it to find ways to use it as a way to help them deal with situations that they face in the modern world:

I wrote my thesis on [thesis title] which took into consideration the need for culturally sensitive art therapy practices and the role that our cultural history has to play in our current health and wellbeing. I believe the loss of our language and cultural collective healing practices such as keening have contributed to the younger generations dis-ease within themselves and their communities. I feel it is important not to lose connection to the wisdom of previous generations (Jane Email November 2017)

Some participants also spoke about how in the process of reimagining keening at the workshops, they felt that they were at times drawing from what they described as a ‘lost knowledge’ which they believed to be transmitted by means of a ‘generational’ memory from their ancestors. People in the workshops talked about the potential of connections between their distant ancestors to more recent relatives and their own family histories. Butler (2015) found a similar trope of establishing a sense of belonging by way of reference to ancestors amongst contemporary Irish Pagan communities and explains that the term ‘ancestor’ itself can mean different things to different people. Sometimes it refers to family members who have passed away recently but for others ‘it can have a more all-encompassing meaning and is used to refer to all of the human beings who lived on the planet before us; it means former existence of humankind in its entirety’ (Butler, 2015, p. 98). In the keening workshops this was also the case with the term ‘ancestor’ being used for the recently deceased as well as being used as an allusion to the generations of ancestors back through time. The ‘spirits’ of the ancestors’ were also called upon on several occasions during the keening workshops.

A concept oft discussed among the Finnish lament practitioners and in the Irish workshops alike was that the deep emotional and ‘felt’ connections with the past happens

because the memory of the tradition still exists in what has been expressed as one's 'genetic' or cultural make-up. In a conversation with one of the Finnish lamenters that I met, she described feeling like lament was in her 'genetic makeup',<sup>56</sup> though it seemed to me that she was using the term 'genetic' to refer loosely to something that she feels has been passed down to her rather than meaning biological genetics. In discussions during workshops, the possibility of 'remembered' connections to the keening women of the past seemed intriguing for participants. It seemed that there was an acute awareness and sadness about the fact that, for well over a hundred years, there has been little or no oral transmission or embodied learning style of transference of keening.

It seemed that there was a yearning for a way to bridge that gap and to find a way to feel a connection to the past, through the workshops. Thus, the concept that arose within the workshops was that there could be an 'inherent' or a somehow 'remembered' connection to the original practice of keening. It was only recently that I discovered, when speaking to an elderly aunt about what my PhD was about, that my own paternal great grandmother who died before I was born, keened at funerals. My aunt only vaguely remembered it as she was young at the time, but she demonstrated for me what she remembered of how it sounded; she began to rock to and fro as has been described by many a commentator on the tradition. I was fascinated to hear this and it made me wonder whether the ease with which I had entered into composing and performing laments during the keening workshops might be because it is something already 'inherent' in me?

As with many experiences based in sensation and emotion discussed in this thesis, I was continually aware of the difficulties of articulating such feelings in words. What people

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<sup>56</sup> I understood the use of the term 'genetically' here and 'genetic' to mean the perceived interconnection of all things through time on a 'cellular' level rather than in terms of Finnish or Irish genetic make-up.

seemed to mean by ‘inherent’ is a descriptor for a kind of feeling they had about the past and their positionality in time and place in light of what they had learned about the practice of keening and its history. It is this perceived positionality, engagement, and reflection on their own identities within a shared culture and history that appeared to bring about a sense of healing, wholeness and belonging.

These felt senses are common amongst groups which Heelas and Woodhead (2005) have termed as the “holistic milieu”, meaning that those who participate in such groups appear to have a strong awareness of personal wellbeing and of a harmonising of the body, mind, and spirit. In the keening workshops, those concepts of belonging, wholeness, and healing, seemed to be heightened when participants felt that they were coming together to reinvoke and remember a common history and connection to strong Irish female ‘ancientness’. These feelings may have been informed by the well-known mythical stories surrounding powerful Irish goddesses and heroines such as for example, Queen Medb, Macha, Badb and the Morrigan, and the ‘sheela na gig’ (Goode, 2000). The human keening woman of the past has a relationship to these strong mythic figures, and her skills and her expertise is conceptualised in modern interpretations as an essential and influential presence in important life moments of past peoples (Bourke, 1993; Lysaght, 1997; Ní Shíocháin, 2018).

Historically in Ireland (as outlined in Chapter 3), women’s voices were generally suppressed in public forums because of the hegemony of Catholicism and the Church-State political situation. It is thought that within the few days of the wake taking place, however, women in the role of keeners temporarily gained power and authority both socially, politically and spiritually, and particularly skilled keening women could potentially hold a powerful influence over a crowd:

The keening woman was both ecstatic and disruptive, and yet these traits seem to have been central to her power and influence, to the licence she had both to speak out and ritually guide the community through transition (Ní Shíocháin, 2018, p. 32).

It could be posited, therefore, that ‘once upon a time’ there was a chink of light for Irish women’s voices to be heard in the performance of their keens. In the keening workshops it seemed that it was important (for the female participants in particular) to feel that, through the perceived power of the lamenting woman in the recent past (discussed in contemporary literature), they still had a means of connection to the strength of those strong ancient mythological females like goddesses.

The endeavours to reimagine lament such as has occurred in Finland and in Ireland, might be considered as an attempt to ‘remember’ and regenerate female power, manifested not as a kind of androcentric construction of capitalist power that we are familiar with, but a softer, caring, and more nurturing kind of ‘power’ that brings with it the ability to protest or resist. This thinking is in line with that of Ní Shíocháin (2018), who describes the nineteenth century singer/composer of the Irish oral tradition, Máire Bhuí Ní Laeire, as a ‘singer of ideas’ who, along with women of her likeness in previous centuries, were important but forgotten figures of Irish revolutionary history. With their ‘web of ideas’, Ní Shíocháin believes many of these women were seminal to the anticolonial movement and the birth of subsequent political movements. These women, she contends, have been largely neglected ‘due to an overreliance on the part of historians on printed material in English from the period, which, [...] is more reflective of ‘the experiences of middle-class political activists in Dublin and Belfast’ (Ní Shíocháin, 2018, p. 4). She continues:

The singer of ideas, therefore, tells a different story of the ideas that shaped human society and culture to that of official history [...] such an alternative history of ideas in which a woman of no letters engaged the colonial world is worth reliving and reimagining (Ní Shíocháin, 2018, p. 5).

What was very present for keening workshop participants was their construction of identities in relation to these strong women characters of the past, albeit that there was no physical connection in anyone's living memory to these people.

There are many theories that examine the phenomena of felt or perceived connections to the past, whether that is to past communities, practices, or identities, and the area of memory studies offers one lens through which to explore this. Brian Conway's (2003) work on memory and trauma in post-conflict Ireland examines how Bloody Sunday has been remembered and commemorated over the years and highlights the role of memory in shaping collective identity. Additionally, Siniša Malešević's reference to Herbert J. Gans (1994) concept of 'symbolic ethnicity' which allows people to maintain a sense of ethnic identity and pride without the need for continuous cultural immersion. For instance, celebrating St. Patrick's Day without a deep connection to Irish culture (Malešević, 2010). This helps frame the participants' symbolic connection with Irishness—whether real or imagined. These perspectives are helpful to connect the historical and emotional narratives explored in the workshops with Ireland's changing cultural and social landscape.

The work of Danielle Drozdowski et al., (2016), for example, highlights the importance of engagement with the 'more-than-representational and ephemeral memories', in the formation of people's identity narratives. They contend that the experiential, felt, sensed, heard, tasted, and touched aspects of those narratives are as important as the prevailing emphasis in academia on the 'representational' and the empirical. Their work is focused 'at places of, and in, memory and with memory narratives that involve trauma – whether in terms of wounded landscapes or wounding stories' (Drozdowski, et al., 2016, p. 448). Even though the participants of the keening workshops have no direct memory of the keening tradition themselves, they believed that they 'felt' and sensed a connection to it and

to the women who performed it in the past. Drozdowski, et al., attempt to convey that ‘both human and the non-human have a capacity to invoke (re)productions of memory and identity, individually, and collectively’ (Drozdowski, et al., 2016, p. 448).

The attempts to reimagine keening might be described by some as being based in an overly nostalgic view of the tradition, but from the perspectives of many of the workshop participants, it was this very process which offered them a means of anchoring or securing their own identities within the culture in a way that directly connected them to this particular tradition, as well as to a more general sense of place and a belonging to a ‘collective’ of keeners past and present. The work of Smith and Campbell (2017) on ‘nostalgia’ has also been a useful lens through which to attempt to understand what could be considered as ‘imagined pasts’. The term ‘nostalgia’ is a complex one which has its critiques and champions in academia. It involves the process of selecting ‘particular aspects of the past that are emotionally valued and singles them out for particular attention, if not in some cases fetishization’ (Smith & Campbell, 2017, p. 615).

Nostalgia has often been negatively associated with ‘melancholy, maudlin sentimentality and futile longing’ (Smith & Campbell, 2017, p. 612), however, if viewed from a different perspective, nostalgia has the potential to be ‘present centred’ and to aid in dealing emotionally with the past. Looking back or imagining nostalgically can foster a sense of connection and an anchoring point which engenders ‘a sense of belonging and appreciation of social or geographical “place”’ (Smith & Campbell, 2017, p. 623). Thus, nostalgia can become a useful ‘affective practice’ to foster a sense of belonging as well as a means to potentially imagine a future (Smith & Campbell, 2017, p. 613).

The use of a ‘look backwards’ by way of informing workshop participants of the history of lament traditions, possibly inspired a nostalgic and an emotional feeling which

allowed them to engage with the lost practice and the reimagining of it for the future. It was indeed in my own look backward at the lament traditions of Ireland and Finland that first piqued my interest in exploring the possibility of a regeneration project. Some keening workshop participants felt strongly that in this group they were the next iteration of keepers and protectors of women's histories and traditions, and they expressed that this was an important part of their own healing journey.

Studies in the field of psychology including Sani, et al. (2008), have demonstrated that personal wellbeing can be achieved through experiencing the self as 'temporarily extended and as a singularity that moves across time' and that this is further enhanced when people feel that they belong to a 'perceived collective continuity' (Sani, et al., 2008, p. 366). They explain how having a sense of belonging to a collective, which is perceived to have endured through generations, is thought to be beneficial as a basis of good mental health, as well as for a positive sense of self-esteem and for higher levels of 'social well-being' (Sani, et al., 2008, p. 365). Being part of a 'perceived collective community affords the group a sense of timelessness and transcendence thereby providing its members with symbolic immortality, which is known to enhance self-esteem' (Sani, et al., 2008, p. 366). Butler (2015), for example, describes how, in a search for an 'authentic' past, contemporary Pagans in Ireland feel a need to associate themselves with the sacred aspects of what they consider a more ancient (pre-Christian) Irish culture by way of their choice of sacred sites, festivals, and certain ritual actions which are all part of a striving for connection with an ancestral culture and an identity as a group and as individuals (Butler, 2015, p. 105). Smith & Campbell (2017) reveal that when an individual feels part of a perceived community, they feel that it is 'one entity', which I will discuss in Chapter 9 as a sense of 'oneness'. I return to this feeling of 'oneness' in Chapter 10 where I explore these concepts as part of a spiritual cosmology associated with the lament revival.

## Generational Trauma

In some of the casual conversations that I had with people at the keening workshops, people mentioned that they felt that there is a strong need to ‘reintroduce’ Irish people to keening because of their belief that in Ireland there is a collective ‘generational trauma’, as some put it, caused by famine, colonialism, and the Catholic Church abuses that has been passed down to the current generation. Exploring keening, for some workshop participants, meant paying attention to centuries of trauma inflicted upon the Irish people, which is understood to have built up over the centuries and which is considered to never have been properly ‘dealt with’. This concept of accumulated trauma was described by some as a force which affects both individuals and the collective community of Irish people on a national level. One of my participants described it in the following terms:

It’s the calling back, the restoring of the shame disconnect that my people have experienced over time. I’m healing on behalf of a collective, not just my own healing, that is what my belonging is (Interview 1a with Joan April 2019).

This participant also reflected that those connections that she felt, constituted for her what she describes as a ‘bodily remembering’ of generations of trauma suffered by their ancestors:

In that lament I did in our workshop, it was a calling back through the ancestral line to heal the disconnect that my current family is holding (Interview 1a with Joan April 2019).

This participant felt very strongly that she had a responsibility to run these workshops because of her conviction that ‘each generation banks the trauma’ and that women’s bodies, in particular, held a ‘cellular memory’ of traumatic familial histories as well as the traumatic histories of their nation. It was suggested by her and several other of my research collaborators in Ireland and in Finland that this ‘handed down’ trauma is inherited ‘genetically’ and which they believe has shaped them as humans in the world:

I think the trauma that I was carrying wasn't even of my own or of this lifetime so it's part of my lineage, my ancestral storyline, almost as if my journey is this incarnation.

This is a common trope also in the Finnish workshops. In Chapter 5, I described the story of social trauma due to war and displacement of the Karelian people in Finland and the traumas felt by the 'war children' who were separated from their families and the related mental health issues experienced by them. One of the people I met in Finland explained (through one of the English speakers present) how she uses lament to deal with what was described to me as a 'genetic memory of sadness' which related to her being a 'war child'. According to the Finnish lament teachers Pirkko Fihlman and Tuomas Rounakari, in many of the *Äänellä Itkijät* lament workshops that they have facilitated, the topic of troubled family relationships rooted in those traumatic times certainly comes up frequently, even for second and third generations of those 'war-children' who attend. As Tuomas Rounakari explains:

War generations were rebuilding the country and there was not much room nor capability to show love and support for children. I see the second/third generation trauma affecting nearly everybody (Email from Tuomas Rounakari)

Tuomas talked about how he has used lament to try to help people in Finland with these 'inherited trauma' issues, as he sees them. Ireland has a similarly traumatic history, which was something I discussed with the Finnish lamenters.

'Generational trauma' has been a subject of research since the 1970's in the burgeoning field of 'transmission studies' within the fields of psychology and psychiatry, where research has shown that the mental health of those who have suffered childhood trauma can often adversely affect the next generations. Evidence of 'transgenerational trauma' is elucidated in Danieli (1988) in an extensive edited volume on the topic and is supported by more recent studies, for example Fromm (2018). Cathy Caruth (1996), who focuses on the languages of

trauma, tells us that trauma is never one's own alone, and argues that through history 'we are implicated in each other's traumas' (Caruth, 1996, p. 25). She posits that it is through our voices in the present that we can carry the voices of the past, even if they are not voices that we know, and it is through the language of trauma that we can allow them to cry out from our wounds (Caruth, 1996, p. 139).

### Ireland's Traumatic Past

Ireland has had a difficult and complex social, cultural, and religious history. Ireland and its people have encountered many centuries of turmoil and suffering as a consequence of various happenings and factors including feudal wars, colonial oppression, famine, civil war, rebellions, and the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland. In Ireland's more recent history, according to historian David Lloyd, a large part of Ireland's recent traumatic inheritance can be blamed on the advancing intensity of the ultra-conservative Catholic Church during the late nineteenth century and which subsequently gained a strong influence in the formation of the new Irish state in the twentieth century (Lloyd, 2013).

For much of the twentieth century, the Church had control over almost every element of Irish life, holding a tight grip on the legal, educational, medical, and other state institutions that ran the country. The Catholic Church's efforts to 'batten down the moral hatches' resulted in it having tight control through legislation over women's bodies, as well as over their work and social lives (Earner-Byrne & Urquhart, 2019, p. 5). If a woman became pregnant out of wedlock in Ireland even into the 1970s, there were very few choices, one being to marry the father of the child, the other to go to a 'Mother and Baby Home', or some other Catholic 'charitable' institution to give birth to the child and then put them up for adoption:

'The Irish state and Catholic Church established Magdalene laundries and Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland. These institutions forcibly housed

unwed women who became pregnant, the last of which closed in 1996. It is estimated that 35,000 women were forced into these institutions and 6,000 babies died in their care. In 2014, a mass grave of babies and children was found in the septic tank at Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway' (Clark, 2021).

When abortion became legal in Britain in 1967, many Irish women travelled there, mainly to England, to have abortions. As well as the recorded 200,000 women who have had terminations in Britain, there is a long history of Irish women trying to hide pregnancies, having 'back street abortions', and likely an unrecorded number of infanticide cases (Earner-Byrne & Urquhart, 2019, p. 9).

There were other institutions in Ireland, run by the Catholic Church, that were accorded responsibility for the care of the most vulnerable in Irish society such as 'troublesome' children and those deemed mentally ill. Unfortunately, the 'care' for many of these vulnerable people involved horrific abuses, uncovered to the general public only at the end of the century, when case after case of Church abuse scandals came to light (Inglis, 1998; Mulholland, 2019; O'Sullivan & O'Donnell, 2012; Turpin, 2022;). It has also come to light that many thousands of children, both in Ireland and abroad, were abused physically and sexually by priests, nuns, or their 'lay' teachers throughout the twentieth century. According to Mary Gail Frawley O'Dea (2007), at the time of publication of her book, there were still reports of abuse being made, for instance in the United States (Frawley O' Dea, 2007, pp. 217-220).

There can be no denying that in Ireland today, and worldwide, there are large numbers of people still living who have suffered at the hands of these institutions. As a consequence, there are several generations of people who have lived with the resultant trauma, distress, and shame. For many, their stories still have not been told and remain hidden and not 'dealt

with'<sup>57</sup>, demonstrating how prevalent and how close to us this traumatic history is, as Irish people. Victims of such abuse have lived through mental and physical trauma to the extent to which they could be described as what anthropologist Carol Kidron calls 'wounded survivors of a distant past' (Kidron, 2003, p. 514). Kidron was particularly speaking of studies she has conducted on Holocaust survivors and is concerned with what she terms 'inherited trauma'. When we consider Irish history using Kidron's framework, we interpret this history as centuries of damage that has been done to the Irish psyche. In accordance with such psychological approaches, we could say that 'transgenerational trauma', and its after effects, has also occurred in Ireland. At the keening workshops, personal traumas as well as collective traumas were discussed, and the concept arose of traumas that are passed on from one generation to the next. One of the workshop participants asserted:

We are all traumatized. How could a sense of belonging not be an issue?  
(Interview 1a with Joan April 2019).

For some participants, that sense of belonging to a past of trauma was very important and they found a way, through the workshops, to express their feelings about this.

### Cultural Belonging and Human Wellbeing

As described above, my research participants placed great significance on the feeling of belonging that resulted from the keening workshops. People described the belonging as a sense of place, a connection to ancestors or to Irish traditional culture. Taylor and Osborne (2010) claim that when an individual possesses a clear idea of their collective or cultural identity, and feel they belong to it, this has a direct bearing on positive feelings about oneself (Taylor & Osborne, 2010, p. 104). In addition to this, it has been found that if someone

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<sup>57</sup> This I can relate to personally in relation to a recent story told to me about a priest who had abused a child and where this is still is a secret today, eight decades after the abuse happened.

believes that their cultural identity is something that has persisted through time, a ‘cultural continuity’, it can ‘connect the individual to the clear past and future of one’s group, to something greater than oneself that persists through time’ (Usborne & de la Sablonnière, 2014, p. 448).

Whether the connection that is felt has any basis in fact or history did not appear to be of particular concern to the keening workshop participants, but what was more interesting for them was the depth of feeling and their connection to Irish culture. In a similar way to the contemporary Irish Pagan groups that Butler (2015) describes, both the factual and the imagined are significant because they together provide a sense of cultural belonging (Butler, 2015, p. 116). According to some psychological perspectives, this sense of cultural belonging that is cultivated in turn leads to a ‘greater sense of self-esteem and psychological wellbeing’ (Taylor & Usborne, 2010, p. 104). Taylor & Usborne (2010) tell us that cultural, and in some cases religious, identity, is thought to be one of the most important and pervasive forms of collective identity (Taylor & Usborne, 2010, p. 99). It is not surprising then, that when a religious identity which has damaged so many generations of people, as it has in Ireland in recent history, that people seek out an identity that is separate to the troubled one and turn to seek the roots of a pre-Christian or other than Christian cultural identities (Ganiel, 2016; Mulholland, (2019).

Of course, trauma is not something unique to Irish or Jewish populations. Some of the participants at the keening workshops were not Irish and actually had no historical connection with Ireland, but they still felt an urge to lament and throughout the days of the keening workshops to release their own long hidden and, as they regarded them, repressed stories of trauma, shame, anger, grief, and pain. Kidron (2003) in her studies of generational trauma in Holocaust victims, describes people who have carried trauma throughout their lives to be ‘trauma descendants’ (Kidron, 2003, p. 514). She speaks of how trauma can be hidden away

in the recesses of people's minds in a 'purposeful forgetting' for decades or even centuries and that 'the great majority of trauma survivors have kept the details of their pasts a painful secret' (Kidron, 2003, p. 514). Kidron tells us that even where the past is narrated in therapy, which she claims has proven to be beneficial to a certain degree, in many cases 'traumatic suffering has been found to resist articulation' (p. 514) with the pain of trauma often never being spoken about explicitly. Kidron goes on to ponder how people can access these 'silenced' cultural memories and how memories from decades or even centuries ago might be correlated as the cause of present-day ills, asking 'how does one frame second, third, or fifth hand traumatic memory?' (Kidron, 2003, p. 516).

Research participants shared with me their thoughts about what effect the keening workshops had on them and it seems that the process often found things that were hidden, even those things that people may have never intended to disclose, or didn't know were still problematic for them, as with my experience that I described in Chapter 7. There was a strong impression given in the conversations that I was having with people before, during, and after the workshops that keening, a previously long held system of dealing with both generational and social traumas in Ireland, has been missing from the landscape for too long. One of the participants that I spoke to expressed this:

Irish peoples spirit was broken [...] pushed into particular types of behaviour which was about survival (Joan 1a)

The perceived connection to that old wisdom and knowledge from the past allowed some participants at the workshops to tap into and touch deep feelings of loss or trauma or anger of their own. Within that process, many shared that they felt a sense that they belong to something ancient. By learning the history of keening and discussing and speculating about how the function of the old tradition might have helped individuals and communities in the

past, a connection is made in keening workshops between personal narratives and experiences and what people feel is lacking for themselves or society in general today. Through the re-imagining of keening, it seemed that they were connecting with something that they felt was missing for themselves and the world in general, seemed to aid the healing process for participants and helped them to understand themselves better

Finally, returning to Kidron (2013) who asks: ‘how can descendants access silenced ancestral memories?’ and ‘what type of memory-work and identity-making practices are capable of bridging the past to constitute descendants who perceive themselves as wounded survivors of a distant past? (Kidron, 2003, p. 514). I had similar findings to Kidron in how, like her research participants, many lament workshop participants talked about how keening helped them in ‘dealing with’ or ‘working through’ their personal life traumas as well as helped them form a connection to their cultural history. For those non-Irish participants, there was a forging of a stronger sense of place since they were able to connect their individually experienced traumas to ‘Ireland’s trauma’ by way of participating in something traditional. The reimagined form of keening offers people a vehicle through which to ‘call to’ and connect with their ancestors, however conceptualised. What was interesting about this was that even though some of the workshop participants were not of Irish descent, there was a sense that that through participating in a workshop that had a very specific Irish cultural/historical focus, they too could feel this ‘connection’ to their own version of ‘Irishness’ however that manifested. As an example, one of the participants who is of Anglo-Irish descent and who told the group that growing up she was never allowed to speak the Irish language and she was always reminded that she was English, not Irish, was delighted to be able to have her laments translated (by another participant) into Irish and really embraced this. She also lamented on that missing piece of her cultural heritage. As discussed in Chapter 4, ritual itself has disappeared from contemporary communities and societies, so it seems that

through the keening workshops people also perceived the loss of Irish traditional rituals and the loss of Irish lament itself, as a shared universal loss.

Through the embodied experience of crying, letting go, rocking, witnessing, caring, and generally freeing up of social conditioning which usually does not accept this sort of behaviour in everyday life, a feeling of a collective ‘belonging’ emerged for many of the keening workshop participants. That sense of belonging carried over also to a sense of belonging collectively to a cultural history of trauma. The different senses of belonging to the group and to the wider culture aided in what people at keening workshops often described as a ‘cathartic’ healing for them. This feeling also is related to theoretical concepts of ‘communitas’ and ‘collective effervescence’, which I will discuss next in Chapter 9. It seems that the connection that keening workshop participants felt to something bigger and more ancient through time (although not in a time of living memory), strengthened their sense of belonging and identity and was considered an important aspect of healing in this context.

## **Chapter 9: Lasting Bonds - Communitas and Shared Emotion**

In this chapter, I address the themes of ‘togetherness’ and the experience of expressing emotion in, or as, a group. My findings reveal the powerful emotional effect that the process of reimagining and as such ‘re-sounding’ keening in the setting of a guided workshop has had on the people who attended. Although each person’s experience in a workshop was bound to be different, some common themes have emerged with regards to the effects that the workshops had on us as individual participants, and on us as a group. Common themes include: letting go/release, community/bonding, ‘witnessing’, belonging, generational trauma and healing. In this chapter, I discuss aspects of letting go, bonding, community, belonging, and witnessing which were focused on collective expressive emotion felt by workshop participants. A certain perception of ‘healing’ was also reported as ‘felt’ at the keening workshops and is attributed by participants to the ‘vibrational’ vocal and sound experience which occurs during the practice of vocal exercises and in the embodied process of crying, sobbing, wailing, humming, rocking, and so on. The vibrational aspect will be discussed further in Chapter 10.

My research collaborators have told me about the effect that the workshops had on them, which was felt by them as communal cohesion and emotional ‘bonding’. To explain these effects, I have found that Emile Durkheim’s theoretical concepts around ‘collective effervescence’ and Victor Turner’s idea of ‘communitas’ are useful as tools of analysis. Ideas such as what is termed by von Scheve & Salmela (2014) as ‘collective emotions’ are also useful here. What Rosa (2019) describes as ‘resonance’ can also be useful to apply when explaining the experience of coming together for the purpose of a common emotional release.

## Liminality

As discussed in Chapter 3, keening would have occurred in the historical context as part of the wider ritual process of the wake event and constituted one part of a longer rite of passage. In historical context, scholars have inferred, keening likely had a healing function (as we understand that term today) in how it allowed for the expression of emotion and dealing with grief. In contrast, in the contemporary keening (workshop), the keening event is the entire ritual. This has implications for my analysis through the lens of classic rites of passage models such as that of van Gennep and Turner; the tripartite model of separation, liminality, and reaggregation would be applied differently to the historical and modern ritual situations. Additionally, we must consider that in the new keening context, the keening ritual is explicitly connected with healing, is conceptualised as being a healing tool in itself, and is done intentionally for the purpose of healing.

To summarize instances of significance related to the liminal state of the keening workshops, I identify those aspects such as the process of composing in a ‘wild’ state in the freeform, spontaneous space of the workshop, and how that served to bring clarity for people. Such a space allows for a particular kind of creative expression where new ideas are formed outside of the constraints of social conditioning and of ‘normal’ ideas and behaviours. As described in Chapter 7, from when the facilitator does the initial cleansing ceremony to when they close the circle at the end of the weekend, a liminal space-time is created where the whole workshop feels like it is an ‘out of the world’ experience. While much more could be said on liminality in the keening workshops, I have decided to focus my analysis on the experience of ‘communitas’.

## Letting go

Firstly, it must be acknowledged that it takes a certain amount of bravery to sign up for a keening workshop, especially for anyone who has deeply held hurt or grief which has been persisting for years, and which might be considered by them as not having been properly ‘dealt with’. Most participants who came to the workshop were interested in the idea of being able to ‘let go’ safely, in a group situation without judgement or embarrassment. As explained before, many of the workshop participants were ‘wellbeing’ or mental health practitioners of various kinds and were also interested in seeing if keening could be incorporated into their own practices.

The idea of ‘letting go’ also raised some fears for people who worried about whether they might lose control in that ‘letting go’ process; once the tap was turned on, could it be turned off? One of the people who left one of the workshops early<sup>58</sup> because of this worry, explained to me afterwards in their feedback:

I felt I wouldn’t be able to mind myself if I had gone too deep, I had done enough that day (Interview Kerry, 1c April 2019).

Another participant who attended the second weekend workshop also revealed afterward that they felt there was the possibility of things going out of control:

It was about trust, none of us knew how it was going to work, there was a sense of danger at one point, potential for getting out of control Sense of danger/potential for out of control (Joan Interview 1a April 2019).

The fear of losing control was something I had initially been worried about myself when I first witnessed people lamenting in Finland, as I discussed in Chapter 5. When I observed the

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<sup>58</sup> As described in Chapter 7, this participant attended a workshop that was divided into two stages, where the first stage was an introduction with some vocal exercises and the second part was the deeper work. Participants had the choice to leave at the mid-point, which this participant chose to do.

intense heightening of emotion at my very first lamenting session at Pirkko's house, I was rather taken aback by it, particularly when one of the lamenters, who was expressing her anger at the damage to the environment, was at one point kneeling down and beating on the ground, really crying and sobbing loudly and angrily, while at the same time 'singing' (not in the tuneful sense), the words of her lament. This was all a bit of a shock to me initially as I had never experienced such an immediate 'turning on' of high emotion like this before in my life. However, by the end of the session, which lasted for around three hours, I could see how the lamenters eventually came back from that state to a normal calm state again very quickly after the laments had finished and that they were very relaxed, laughing and joking with each other and appearing relieved and thankful for the opportunity to lament together again.

When I discussed this fear of losing control with the workshop facilitator, Tuomas Rounakari, he had reassured me that although the workshop format can take participants through very difficult emotional processes which can lead to people becoming a bit 'out of control', in general he has found that by the end of the workshops, people seem to naturally come 'back to themselves' more calm and at ease and mostly in a much better state than when they initially came to the workshops. He told me that he believes that this is because the body has its own regulation system and that we need to trust more in the natural bodily function of crying, rather than being fearful of it. He also explained that when people are doing their own individual laments, it really helps when the others in the group are crying, sobbing etc., along with them. This, he has observed, 'raises the energy' in the group, providing a sense of communal support and trust to the person actively lamenting. The others in the group are taking part and not simply observing the lamenter. I saw this for myself when I first witnessed the cacophony of crying and wailing and the coming back to calmness at the first Finnish lament session I participated in, and I have witnessed this same pattern in every session that

I have participated in since then. I am very comfortable being part of this process now and it does not shock me or worry me anymore.

When it came time for my participation in the Irish keening workshops, I was keen to relay to the group this idea of crying being ‘self-regulating’, as I had witnessed it. So, during the initial keening workshop introductions, where I spoke about my own experience of lamenting, I made mention of this as I thought it might be useful for people who felt nervous of letting go to hear from someone who had already been through this experience<sup>59</sup>.

In interviews later, some participants did mention that any initial fears that they might had had about losing control had dissolved for them as they went through the workshop exercises and lament composition process. People reported that after the workshops they felt mostly relieved and happy that they had ‘let go’ to the extent that they did:

It helped to articulate some of the feelings I had, as well as allowing me to tap in and release some sorrow [...]. By allowing my grief to expand and mingle with the grief and support of others it felt like something massive had been released and it was good to acknowledge the magnitude of it, something I had diminished or contracted, and it was a big relief. It’s like it was bigger but less scary than I had imagined. I also liked how it was communal rather than solitary (Caoimhe SM7 April 2018).

It had been interesting and a little unsettling, and quite emotional, taking that space and time to explore emotional, spiritual, and personal issues within a group, most of whom I did not already know, and it would be of interest to do that, or something similar, at another time (SR 6 April 2018).

People reported liking the feeling of being able to freely cry without guilt and without fear of condemnation or of feeling embarrassment:

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<sup>59</sup> A reminder that the workshop facilitators spoke in detail about what people should do if they were feeling uncomfortable both before, during and after the workshops. My aim was to reassure people based on my own experience.

Honestly surprised that I got so much from it, I am a person that finds it hard to be open about my feelings in a large group, and suppose I felt what good does it do? But this experience was different. We all need to grieve and being able to express that grief in a safe space left me feeling really good and wanting to do more of the same (Deirdre, SR8 April 2018).

For some it gave them the possibility to be able to cry loudly and freely in front of others which they say they would never have done before:

It's opened up a well and I find it much easier to cry in front of people when I'm deeply moved [...] I really do feel that crying has been easier it's amazing to be able to (Kerry Interview Ic April 2019).

We had the outrageous, courageous audacity to be self. People want to be met without shame or judgement (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

Many of the workshop participants were familiar with wellbeing, holistic or in neo-shamanic types of retreats, several being experienced retreat and workshop facilitators themselves, and some of them felt that the lament workshops went very deep for them emotionally and bodily:

It was like a calling back to a part of me that was split of through suffering (Joan Interview Ia April 2019)

I felt it has pulled me back into my body, I don't think I'm fully balanced yet but much more whole again and not so displaced by the [traumatic event] (Mary WA1 May 2019).

As previously mentioned, for some their discovery of lament as a form of healing tool has proved to be the most transformational technique that they have encountered, especially when compared to other workshops they have experienced, in the area termed the 'holistic milieu' (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). One participant explained:

It was different to other workshops because we didn't talk about ourselves, it was about the work, often in other workshops there is surface level chatter, it's like we did away with that and stripped it back to meaning and true connection (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

How I am experiencing grief this time is different so I just thought wow, yes I am. Through my grieving process I have talked freely with my family and met many wonderful people through my Lamenting experience and

we are sharing our grief stories openly, talking about death and dying (Mary WA1 May 2019).

Another participant who was in an older age group and has attended and facilitated holistic types of gatherings for many years explained how she felt changed by the experience:

The weekend we all shared changed me more than anything I've done. (Gina WA4 May 2019).

One of the most profound results of the workshops for the participants was that they have felt a very powerful inner transformation and a 'shift' within them on this journey of reimagining keening. Others felt that in releasing long 'pushed down' feelings about traumatic experiences, a deep sense of closure was possible. Many reported a 'shifting' of blocked out feelings, emotion, and years of dealing with trauma:

After the attack I covered the wound, stuffed it with dressings and put a plaster over it. Lamenting on the trauma, I have taken the plaster off, and the stuffing out, cleaned the wound and am healing from inside out, if the wound was as deep as a thumb, I am about half way up the healing process. So lamenting on healing now instead of the incident (Mary WA1 May 2019).

I have found considerable release in my trauma, this process is continuing but I feel it is ultimately life changing (Mary SR1 May 2019)

A piece of me left that day, in 1982. My young 5 year old mind summarised (*sic*) the story around the hurt I felt in that loss. The Lament weekend opened the space for that piece of me to return. I'm feeling like fully-fledged jigsaw with no piece missing (Sorcha WA1 24 May 2019).

Some people felt that their troubled family relationships were improved after being at the workshop:

Definitely better family relationships after shedding long held anger, frustration, sorrow (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

I'm finding a deep sense of acceptance love and forgiveness which means time with my family is deeper and richer with much sweetness being felt (Karen WA3 April 2019).

Some participants found that the workshops helped them to release grief for loved ones that had not been dealt with, even those who had been deceased for long periods of time:

My lament focused on [name], and his death and the fact that so much was left unsaid before he died. I was deeply affected by this as I had not prepared this lament, it just came out when I started. I am aware of how I wanted my relationship with [name] to be different, so I was angry, sad, and upset, but I realise now that I cannot change anything about that relationship, just accept that he is gone, and we both did our best. It is something that will always be with me, but I felt I let go of the angry on the day and that was great (Michael SM9 April 2018).

It was lovely for me to be with my sense of loss without wanting to change or fix (Michael SM9 April 2018)

I found that through some of their exercises and people's own expressions of loss it was brilliant for me, the tears were falling in a lot of the exercises, and it was a lovely release [...] it was a carrying on of not letting go of [name] and being allowed to not get back to reality and to put aside releasing about her (Mary Interview 1e April 2019).

Some participants felt that there was more balance to their lives after the workshop and there was a feeling of being 'transformed' by the experience:

I don't think that I understood what balance was until very, very recently, literally since the lament I have had this grounded feeling [...] it was almost like a cellular thing, more landed into the ground. There's a physicality to it (Joan Interview 1a April 2019).

Participants also liked that no-one was trying to comfort them or make it better while they were crying and letting go. The only 'rule' I could identify in the workshops was that there is no need for hugging or consoling people. The idea behind this is that people should be allowed to let all of the tears and the frustration out in whatever way that feels right for them, but knowing that if they need support someone will be there to help them (the facilitators), and this was appreciated by participants:

The lamenting weekend allowed me to state what happened to me, without feeling over-dramatic [it was] without being fixed, facilitated, or made better by anyone else. It enabled me to look with clarity, with the support of my wonderful group, witnessing me in all my, shock - yes, shock even after all these years - my tears, my anger my vulnerability and fear (Mary Interview 1e April 2019).

The permissibility of the full expression of emotion was therefore an important factor in the workshop process.

As discussed in previous chapters, along with the improvisation, experimentation and adaptation that has been speculated on as a characteristic of lament rituals in the past, one of its other postulated features was its communal nature and how this communal dimension was likely an important element. Lament is generally regarded as something which in the past helped a community (or groups within that community) to restore itself after whatever woes had befallen it (Wilce, 2009). This bonding and communal cohesion element appears to also be a feature of the new lament practices today as I have witnessed them and as have been reported to me by my research collaborators.

As I mentioned in Chapter 5, the warm friendships that I witnessed in Finland between lamenters, and the healing that appears to happen in that collective setting, is the result of their coming together as a group, sharing their sorrows and traumas, in this highly emotional way. This kind of strong ‘bonding’ was also experienced in the Irish workshops as they developed. People reported a kind of deep friendship bond happening in the group, which they had never experienced in the other wellbeing or neo-shamanic healing type of workshops that they had previously attended. This bonding between workshop participants, and the healing that it brought with it, seems to have been one of the most unexpected and yet the most significant feature of the experience for people who attended keening workshops:

Any time I have wanted to share with friends or partner I felt it was self-indulgent and asking for comfort and reassurance. What was comforting was that people had heard my experiences, witnessed by others [...] no longer my own private horror story [...] validated me (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

This kind of an intensive feeling of bonding and closeness that happens when people engage in a group activity together has been a subject of research in several disciplinary fields (Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003; Rosa, 2019, von Scheve & Salmela, 2014; Hoffman, 2015). In the keening workshops, people reported that their bodies and minds feel a special bond with the other group members. According to Takahashi & Olaveson (2003), something very similar is evidenced at raves where the participants in rave culture often experience profound feelings of connectedness, communality, equality, and basic humanity when they are dancing together. These researchers propose that the well-recognized Turnerian concept of ‘communitas’ aptly describes the experiences reported by the ravers that they spoke to, and how they experienced raves themselves in their own immersion as researchers in that scene. They saw the raves as something that possessed the characteristics of van Gennep’s ‘liminality’ theory and observed ‘communitas’ emerging in that ‘liminal’ setting (Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003, p. 78).

The term ‘communitas’ was first coined by Victor Turner in the 1960’s in his observation of the initiation rituals of the Ndembu people of Zambia (Turner, 1995). In the following years, the term has gained traction mostly in the field of Anthropology,<sup>60</sup> however, Edith Turner (2012) explained that the term has expanded in its application to studies of sport,

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<sup>60</sup> Victor Turner examined what happens for initiates in the middle ‘liminal’ stage of a rite of passage of the Zambian Ndembu people, borrowing the term ‘liminal’ from van Gennep (from the Latin *limen* or ‘threshold’) and suggested that a state of ‘communitas’ arose in this ritual setting, see Bowie (2006a, p. 139) for further information.

work, festivals, and other examples of group gatherings. The main characteristics of *communitas* according to Turner (2012) is that it is ‘a group’s pleasure in sharing common experiences with one’s fellows’ (Turner, 2012, p. 2) and that it appears unexpectedly, as she puts it, ‘it finds oneness, in surprise’ (p. 3). I identified in my research that *communitas* often arises when people become overwhelmed with a sense of a warm feeling toward others in lament workshop settings, where people are being creative and collectively impulsive, usually around a shared cause or purpose where they find themselves ‘in flow’ with each other. This is something Turner has also commented on:

In the group, all are in unity, seamless unity, so that even joshing is cause for delight and there is a lot of laughter. The benefits of *communitas* are quick understanding, easy mutual help, and long-term ties with others. (Turner, 2012, p. 3)

*Communitas* is spontaneous and can ‘arise unpredictably at any time between human beings in any kind of social grouping’ (Turner, 2012, p. 221). I discuss the ‘unexpected’ aspect of group bonding that I observed in the keening workshops later in this chapter.

The concept of ‘*communitas*’ is very useful to explain what was happening in keening workshops. As I have mentioned already, a strong bond developed between the workshop participants during our time of ‘sounding’, moving, and sharing with each other, which bears all the hallmarks of *communitas*. Turner (2012) also suggests that, as well as appearing unexpectedly, *communitas* also ‘has to do with the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning’ (Turner, 2012, p. 1). Edith Turner describes understanding personally how *communitas* feels, as she experienced it during her fieldwork in 1990 at a gathering in a village in Northern Alaska where whale hunting has been for many centuries a tradition deemed necessary as a way of providing food in a harsh climate. She was attending a ceremony which was being held by the villagers to pray for whales to come into their waters because of the expected change of wind direction, which drives the whales

into their waters, had not happened and they were worried that the whales might not come. At one point everyone put their hands on each other and sang and cried together in one voice, and a feeling of *communitas* came over them:

*Communitas* arose, a tower of the senses, fierce with spirituality. Everyone knew when it started— with the songs, tears, and cries. The very pleasure of *communitas* grew, too, as our voices rose to the rafters (Turner, 2012, p. xi).

What was fascinating about Turner's reporting of this ceremony was that by the time the ceremony had finished, the wind had actually turned and there was a huge relief all around in the belief that their emotional ceremony of prayer and intent, had worked.

Bowie (2006a) tells us that there was concern that van Gennep's and Turner's theories could only be applied to male initiation ceremonies and other theorists have offered theoretical frameworks which they posit would better encompass women's ritual activity (Bowie, 2006a, p. 139), but in line with what Edith Turner describes above, I would argue that the concept of '*communitas*' can certainly be applied to the similar elevation of feeling that has been felt at keening workshops where women were the dominant gender.

*Communitas* could also be said to result in a feeling of harmony and what Rosa (2019) describes as being in 'resonance' with one's self and others and which, for example, is often reported between members of a particular choir and their fellow singers suggesting that it is difficult not to be in harmony with oneself and the world when experiencing such a fundamental physicality through the combination of vocal resonance and in the context of a group setting:

When everything comes together, choir singers experience a kind of 'deep resonance' both between their body and their mental state and between themselves and their fellow singers, (Rosa, 2019, p. 64).

Resonance is something I also identified among the keening workshop groups.

### Collective Effervescence

One of the first scholars to emphasize the positive social functions of emotions and how bodies ‘excite’ and respond to each other in a collective situation was Émile Durkheim with his notion of ‘collective effervescence’, which he found particularly evident in his observance of group rituals. With keening coming under the banner of ritual, this thus provides a useful theory when examining the collective happenings at keening workshops. Durkheim advocated a much more ‘holistic’ understanding of social phenomena, and he defined ‘collective effervescence’ as being generated by ‘a sort of electricity [that] is generated from their [participants’] closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation’ (Durkheim in von Scheve & Salmela, 2014, p. xiv). According to Durkheim, emotion and bonds created in ritual go well beyond the ritual space and those relationships follow through to everyday life. My experience seemed to reflect this theory in my witnessing the lasting bonds between lament workshop participants. For many, these bonds have continued for several years after the keening together, and people have told me how they have friends or people they collaborate with professionally, even today, that they met at the keening workshops.

Expanding on Durkheim, Randall Collins (2014) outlined three important ingredients in what he describes as ‘interaction rituals’ that need to be in place to produce the strength of feeling and close bonding to achieve a successful state of ‘collective effervescence’ in groups:

1. Bodies being close enough together so that they can perceive the ‘micro-signals’ they are giving off in their voices, bodily gestures, and facial expressions.

2. The group must focus their attention upon the same thing, and everyone must be aware of, and in agreement about, what that is.
3. They must feel a shared emotion.

Collins claims that if these three conditions occur to a sufficient degree within a group, both the emotion and the mutual focus become stronger and ‘they build up into what Durkheim called collective effervescence, the rhythmic entrainment of all participants into a mood that feels stronger than any of them individually, and carries them along as if under a force from outside’ (Collins, 2014, p. 299).

As described in Chapter 7, the keening workshops happened in an intimate shared space and at some stages it became a very physically close shared space when, for instance, the group would hold hands together while swaying or with arms around each other in group exercises when making sounds together in the vocal exercises part of the workshop. The ‘shared emotion’ element was that all participants were focused on loss and sorrow, and they shared the feeling of release together. Keening workshops, then, in the light of Collin’s model, appear to hold all the above-mentioned essential ingredients for ritual interaction leading to the production of a successful state of ‘collective effervescence’ and affirming Collin’s assertion that ‘if we are all angry, or sad together, we nevertheless feel better and stronger’ (Collins, 2014, p. 300).

An interesting aspect of Collin’s theory is the contention that successful ‘interaction rituals’ result in further consequences such as the production of deep connections and feelings of solidarity which lead to a ‘higher-order emotional energy’ which leaves ‘a longer-lasting feeling that individuals take with them from the group, giving them confidence, enthusiasm, and initiative’ (Collins, 2014, p. 300). This occurrence is evident in what happened for participants during keening workshops where, as mentioned earlier, the friendships and

bonds which have developed between participants during the workshop have continued in the years post-workshop.

### Collective Emotions

The strong bonding that happened between keening workshop participants is interesting to analyse in terms of a ‘collective emotion’ which is discussed by Von Scheve & Salmela (2014), because inside of that bonding experience, there are so many elements at play. They highlight that studies on collective emotions have been around since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and that the disciplines where this research has been prominent include sociology, philosophy, social psychology, organizational psychology, political science, and social anthropology (p. xiv). The studies on the topic of collective emotion within specific groups, however, has been in the main negative in nature given the kind of groups and emotions focused on the studies. Generally, studies on collective emotions have focused on topics such as conflict, social movements, and collective action happening in large social groups (von Scheve & Salmela, 2014, p. xv).

More recently, von Scheve & Salmela (2014) tell us that there has been an increase in interest on studying collective emotions and related phenomena within the area of spirituality and consciousness, but they argue that, despite this uptick in interest, what has been absent in this newer research are studies of what happens experientially and subjectively for those who experience what they call a ‘spiritual’ feeling or a feeling of ‘oneness’ when in an emotional group setting (von Scheve & Salmela, 2014, p. xv). This an aspect I discuss in Chapter 11.

## Witnessing and Vulnerability

One of the other important elements of the workshops was the feeling amongst participants that the deep closeness and bonding that developed between them was as a result of witnessing each other at their most vulnerable and exposed and defenceless state:

People felt their crying needed to be witnessed (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

Being supported by other people's loss enables a lot (Mary Interview 1e April 2019).

What was a very strong feature of the healing for people was the fact that people witnessed each other's tears and pain (Rita SR6 April 2019).

I have found great relaxation in the idea of witnessing as a truly empowering way to help others deal with their own pain (Gina WA4 May 2019).

It feels important to acknowledge regret without the sense that it must be fixed or changed. It just 'is' and to be with it is very important. Alas... its important to feel and allow our inner grief (Caoimhe SM7 April 2018).

Other people's words help you to release (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

It was in the witnessing and being witnessed where reports of healing appeared to happen for the keening workshop participants, and it was a very important part of the whole experience:

Everyone saw each other being so authentic in a creative way, I felt I was being 'seen' and being seen is a huge part of the healing. Group facilitates a level of healing that can't be done on a one-to-one level (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

By unpacking and decompressing the grief, having it articulated and witnessed, it became at once more expansive, deeper, more intimate and more universal than I had imagined. I'm finding it hard to express this. (Caoimhe SM7 April 2018).

That connection meant that you could sit next to somebody and not talk, it's the kind of ease and respect that you have with family members of long term friend where you feel comfortable. You can just be what you want together, alongside each other (Sorcha WA1 24 May 2019).

Rosa (2019) argues that gazing at someone who is vulnerable and going through emotional pain generates a ‘primordial’ obligation to respond. Telling us that whenever we look at another person in such a heightened state of emotion, we are ‘designed’ to produce a ‘corresponding resonant reaction both in us and between us’ and that this generates a ‘resonant relationship’ (Rosa, 2019, pp. 78-79). Being vulnerable, being ‘needy’, being heard, and being witnessed were some of the important aspects for people as they thought back on the keening workshops. The trust in the others in the group was so strong that people felt that they could let go of their most closely guarded and deeply buried wounds, knowing that someone would listen and respond with their own tears and by sharing their own painful story. Pauline Oliveros (2007) stresses the importance of focused and fully ‘embodied’ listening in human interactions and posits that being heard is akin to being healed. She argues that this is important in the building of a community but that this vital step is often missing in human interactions in the contemporary world. She maintains that ‘being heard is a step toward being understood. Being understood is a step toward being healed. Understanding is a step toward building community’ (Oliveros, 2007, p. 393).

## Belonging

The idea of belonging to a special community, group or ‘kin’ of some kind, is something which, for many, is missing in the contemporary world. As Jamieson et al., (2006) suggests, in today’s more urbanized social landscapes, communities which would once have been based on ‘kinship’ bonds and ritual gatherings no longer exist. Grimes (2000) argues that because of the loss of ‘ritual competency’, which he suggests in the past helped people to navigate through traumatic and ‘dangerous’ transitional moments in the life cycle, people in the contemporary world are left with a ritual and social void in their lives. However, it could be argued that in the keening workshops a bond developed between participants which

filled that void. As explained above, a very close and deep connection developed between the keening group participants that I met. They reported feeling a shared sense of ‘connection’ to common ancestors, language, and homeland, (as discussed in Chapter 8) They felt a cultural belonging but also a belonging to the present moment:

These spaces are needed in our culture, keep doing this important work [...] loved the retreat and love what you are doing to make grief and mourning and lament part of our lived experience (SR10 Fiona April 2019).

Furthermore, the belonging and bonding that was experienced by workshop participants continues to be felt today, even after long periods of non-contact with each other since the workshops which shows that the bond doesn’t necessitate having a physical closeness with each other. Wilce (2017) reported this also from his fieldwork on the lament groups that he studied in Helsinki, quoting the revivalist group’s leader Pirkko Fihlman:

[We have] the feeling like being sisters [*niinku oltas sisaria*]. When we have authentically [*aidosti*] faced each other it’s that kind of eternal [*ikuinen*] friendship that will last and it’s fantastic in these days (Wilce, 2017, p. 242).

This closeness between lamenters in Finland is something that I personally observed with the lament group that I met when I was there, as discussed previously.

What was interesting for me to reflect on afterwards, when I was looking back on my notes and when looking at the data around why people said they were interested in the Irish keening workshops, there was no real sense that people were coming to them for a communal bonding experience, let alone to become part of what did eventually develop into a very closely bonded group experience for many participants. I think this came as a surprise to people. As mentioned before, people initially were coming to workshop with the express intention of doing some emotional releasing for themselves and they were interested in the

potential of ‘recovering’ keening as a lost tradition or possibly tapping into it personally and /or for work purposes. There was no sense that being in a group mattered that much to them.<sup>61</sup> Keohane (2021) reflects on how as humans we ‘are irreducibly plural and other-oriented’ and ‘we are *homines curans*, caring people, plural, multiple, indissolubly inter-dependent social beings, persons with deep human needs, needs that can only be met through and with others’ (Keohane, 2021, p. 339); the friendship bonds which developed in the workshops certainly demonstrate that.

The fact that people presented at the workshops very much as individuals hoping to shed some deep-seated hurts and who had claimed never to have shared these to such a deep extent with anyone before, points to what Keohane (2020) deems to be one of the main ills of today’s society, that we are conditioned to be individualistic beings. In our rush into ‘hyper-modernity’, Keohane suggests, we have forgotten our deep-seated need for secure attachments and intimacy in a trusted social group (Keohane, 2020, p. 338).

Lambert, et al. (2013), tell us that feeling a sense of ‘belongingness’ which is inherent in us ‘is a powerful predictor and cause of finding life meaningful’ (Lambert, et al., 2013, p. 1420) and can make life worthwhile, as well as helping to provide people with stability. As Rosa puts it, this means that ‘the vibrating wires between the world and ourselves are missing, slack, and un-tuned’ (Rosa, 2019, p. 8). Interestingly, in a similar vein, and very apt to consider in the analysis of a study such as this,, trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk (2014, p. 122) tells us that ‘traumatized people are out of synch with others and need synchronizing activities’ to bring them into what he describes as ‘visceral tuning’ (p. 336). In his research, he found that collective singing, dancing, and religious ritual can all create a rhythmic

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<sup>61</sup> There were mentions in the advertising (see Appendix 1) of the ‘sharing’ of grief and trouble etc. in a ‘safe space’ but there was no specific language in the advertising or on the day before commencing the workshops about group ‘bonding’, deep friendship experiences and so on, as potentially being part of the outcome.

communal healing ‘container’ and people who have suffered trauma can begin healing by being in ‘sync’ with an established group (p. 333).

What was an interesting phenomenon to observe about the participants in the keening workshops was how they became transformed from being their conditioned ‘unsynchronized’ selves when they arrived<sup>62</sup> with those ‘vibrating wires’ slack and out of tune, into people who allowed that natural need to ‘belong’ with others to filter in, and who later emerged at the end of the workshop as people who were more ‘in tune’ with the group, the universe, and themselves. This ‘attunement’ directly contributed to the bonding process, and I discuss the ‘vibrational’ mechanisms further in the next chapters.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I’ve reflected on how, despite keening workshop participants initially being nervous about letting go at the workshops, and not necessarily considering it as an event where they would become so deeply engaged with others, it was in that ‘letting go’ that they bonded with people. In being witnessed in the ‘collective effervescence’ that built up in the group, and through experiencing *communitas*, they found their deep healing. This experience, according to many workshop participants, was like no other that they had felt before, despite most of them being seasoned in the holistic ‘wellbeing’ and ‘healing’ categories of workshops.

Despite social conditioning in the contemporary world to be individualistic beings, when those layers of conditioning are peeled away and old wounds are let go, a natural leaning towards others becomes very easy, at least that was my experience and what many participants described to me. According to some, such easy connection is our natural ‘default’

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<sup>62</sup> I definitely include my own experience here as I mentioned in Chapter 7 how ‘wired’ and ‘un-sync’d’ I was myself on the first night of the workshop.

condition. It seems that the deep crying and outpourings made it easier for people to feel safe when they were in a vulnerable state of letting go and this engendered a deep trust of each other. Through witnessing each other's vulnerabilities and the kind responsive reactions offered by those witnessing, people become free of their deeply ingrained social conditioning that promotes individualism and emerged at the end of the workshops with a sense that they belonged to something special and bigger than themselves. The shared vulnerability in that space led some to say that the bonds forged 'would never be forgotten'.

Other findings in the data relate to making vocal soundings together as a group and how that also contributed to the formation of bonds between people. The sound element of the workshop with vocal 'exercises' like crying, wailing, and humming, led participants to feel that there was a vibrational 'force' or energy at play. The aspect of sound and vibration, and its importance for group dynamics, is discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 10: The Sound of Keening: Voice and Vibration

In the two preceding chapters, I discussed the concepts of ‘collective effervescence’, ‘communitas’ and ‘collective emotion’, and I related these concepts to the idea that belonging to a continuous community and an ‘ancient’ culture (however that is imagined or perceived) was important to the Irish keening workshop participants. I demonstrated how those ideas can support and explain, to some extent, why participants felt that they experienced a powerful healing sensation in the setting of the workshops. Whilst the physical aspects of the sound making--the wailing and crying, humming and the rocking to and fro--were a very significant feature of the workshops and appeared to help people to ‘let go’ of pent-up emotions, several participants also reported feeling some kind of non-physical phenomenon while the group was vocalizing together during the workshops. This phenomenon was described by many as a ‘vibrational state’ where a connection to an ‘otherworldly’, intangible sphere was sensed. Through the field of sound studies, this chapter attempts to analyse this more elusive and transcendent element of the workshops reported by participants.

### Spiritual Vibrations

The workshop schedule begins typically with vocalising exercises with participants initially following the facilitator’s instructions to make yawning and breathing sounds with ‘oohs!’ and ‘ahhs!’ and other long vowel sounds. These exercises were an integral feature of the keening workshop, as described in Chapter 7, as a method to allow people to become more comfortable with their own natural voices. People vocalised a bit self-consciously at first, but gradually as time went on, they began to expand on those sounds by improvising with their own vocal expressions which increased eventually into a very loud and raucous cacophony. Some people were humming, some screeching in a high-pitched tone, some babbling incoherently, and some were even screaming. People could be heard at various times fluctuating between each of these sounds, getting louder and louder, until at one point it felt

that we were surging and ‘vibrating’ together as one, and as if there was some kind of ‘energy’ filling the room. As the workshops progressed, during various moments of intensity, the group regularly burst into cacophonous, and almost feverish, loud vocal noise making. Sometimes it was difficult to work out who was making which sounds in this cacophony because all the voices seemed to merge into one sound, and at times the group seemed to ‘vibrate’ together almost as one entity. In my experience of keening workshops, the presence of this vibrational phenomenon has featured particularly strongly. This first happened for me during the Irish pilot workshop at University College Cork that I participated in (described in Chapter 7). I made a note of it in my fieldnotes at the time:

People rocked to and fro while ‘Ochóne’ was being sung, it felt like we were raising some kind of vibration in the room.

This was my first experience of this phenomenon and when the noise eventually quietened down and we came to a natural rest, we looked at each other incredulously. I felt that the others in the group knew something had happened also, and when I mentioned this to people afterwards, many in the group had felt the same ‘vibration’. In my diary notes I reflected on this:

I need to know what the effect on the person is AT THE MOMENT OF UTTERANCE (emphasis taken directly from notes). What ideas, feelings it sparks

From what several participants have reported to me since that first occurrence, it seems there was a strong feeling that, somehow, we were connecting through the sounds that we were making, to some kind of unknown energy, and that we were raising a certain vibrational ‘force’ between us. One of the participants that I interviewed told me that:

Even without words, just sounding, one feels part of a bigger vibration (Joan Interview 1a April 2019).

Another participant described it in the following terms:

Magic happened; I suppose it was the fact that a group of strangers connected through the vibration of sound (Mary Interview 1e April 2019)

Virginie Magnat (2019) mentions experiencing similar sensations when she, as part of a research project<sup>63</sup>, was a participant in a gathering which involved the group ‘vocal toning’ together. Magnat describes feeling that she was:

part of a subtly intimate vocal vault as we sat in a circle with closed eyes, listening and responding to the call of vocalizations spontaneously emanating from different directions [...] It was an immersion in a dream-like flow of sensory perceptions without beginning or end (Magnat, 2019, p. 18).

Magnat’s embodied experience described here seems to mirror what was felt by me and the other workshop participants with our impulsive vocalizations coming from all directions, and which was distinctly sensed by me and others as a vibration of some kind. This sonic and vibrational element of the workshop which participants have described seemed to be the means by which they reached a state where they experienced ‘magic’ or ‘oneness’ but which is difficult to explain and to understand. Bonenfant (2010) explains this vibrational phenomenon between bodies as follows:

When we sound, there is a resonant field of vibration that moves through matter, which behaves according to the laws of physics – it vibrates molecules. This vibratory field leaves us, but is of us, and it voyages through space. Other people hear it. Other people feel it (Bonenfant, 2014).

As mentioned in Chapter 3, historical keening has been interpreted as a ‘crying over’ of the spirit or soul of the deceased into the spiritual world to join the community of ancestors and

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<sup>63</sup> See details of this project at <https://viriniemagnat.space/about>

the keening workshop participants mentioned a spiritual or ecstatic feeling while we were moving and ‘vibrating’ together. I will return to this topic of vibration and the connection to ‘spiritual’ experiences in the next chapter on Spiritual Cosmology, but first I will briefly address the challenge of finding analytical tools to untangle such nebulous concepts.

The main reason for this common challenge, faced by many scholars, some already mentioned in this thesis, such as Takahashi & Olaveson (2003), Becker (2004), Bell (1997), Ní Shíocháin (2018), Hoffman (2015), and as most famously related by Goody (1973), is because it is generally difficult to represent the ‘life worlds’ of others. I have already discussed in detail the literacy/orality debate, and the complexity of participant/researcher ‘positionality’. However, it is important to also explain why this is a predicament for scholars in the field of sound studies too.

Magnat (2019) holds that, because of the dominant ‘scriptocentric’ knowledge system that excludes ‘experiential modes of cognition’, it makes it particularly challenging, if not impossible, ‘to hear, sense, and feel the non-verbal, non-semantic, and non-discursive qualities of vocality’ and it devalues other ways of knowing (Magnat, 2024). Magnat is of the view that there is a:

necessity to move beyond anthropocentric perspectives embedded in dominant Western knowledge systems that foreclose the integration of non-linguistic, non-discursive, and non-representational modalities (Magnat, 2019, p. 124).

By exploring the connections between ritual, vocality, vibration, and ‘non-human agency’, Magnat finds ways of ‘circumventing conceptual constraints on, and theoretical limitations to, the exploration of vocality’ (Magnat, 2024, p. 124). Referring particularly here to her research on indigenous social gatherings where songs, drumming and dance feature strongly, she holds that by understanding phenomenon such as vibrational ‘resonance’, a more

meaningful story can be told of contemporary society than the traditional detached or objective lens. Magnat reasons that by exploring how cross-cultural communities navigate their worlds through the common sonic, the vibratory, and ‘resonant’, found between them, it can highlight a more holistic perspective and can demonstrate how different knowledge systems exist. She maintains that through the exploration of the sonic and the resonant, there is the potential for people to strengthen relationships to their communities and to reconnect to their cultural heritage, as well as the natural environment. This in turn, she suggests, has the effect of enhancing health and wellbeing, and ultimately resulting in an outcome of advancing positive social transformation (Magnat, 2019).

Magnat’s findings have helped me to better understand the significance of the sonic and vibrational element of the keening workshops and the ‘healing’ experienced as an outcome by participants when they sounded together and witnessed each other. As discussed in Chapter 7, the laments which were composed by participants during keening workshops addressed themes of contemporary social issues, such as the historical child sex abuse scandals in Ireland, the Magdelene Laundries, and the stigmatization of women in Irish history. Participants also felt deep connections to their natural environmental surroundings through sounds and sounding about them and several participant laments (including my own) voiced concerns about topics around climate change. These topics were often intertwined with, and related to, difficult personal issues in participants’ personal lives. Through vocalizing and vibrating together at keening workshops, they felt that they discovered a strong connection to community and to a shared cultural heritage, which was expressed in some of their lament compositions.

### Study of Sound

To be able to analyse the importance of vocal and bodily sounds and their vibrational effect on keening workshop participants, I turn to the area of sound studies where in the last twenty

years, there has been a growing interest in trying to understand why human bodily sound is so important, with particular attention being paid to the importance of focusing on vocal sound (Bonenfant, 2014). Bonenfant informs us that there has been a rise in theoretical speculation around sound in subjects such as musicology, biomusicology, evolutionary psychology, neuropsychology, and cultural studies. Whilst there has been a growing scholarly awareness of the significance and value of studying sound, sound studies is a vast area of research with a huge variety of academic approaches from many different disciplinary fields, which often prevents it coming under one disciplinary ‘umbrella’ of interpretational and epistemological framing (Hackett, 2012). This is evidenced by the work of scholars in a variety of disciplinary fields, such as Ong (2002 ), Weiner (2009), Hackett (2011), Gershon (2013), Schulze (2012), Sterne (2012), Magnat (2020), and many more besides. Despite disciplinary differences, however, there seems to be a generally united discourse in the field, which stresses how vital it is for all academic disciplines to pay more attention to topics such as voice, hearing, soundscapes, and listening.

Research in the area of sound, especially when connected to vibration and its effect on bodies, has in the past been mostly concerned with measurable ‘frequencies’ or the physical nature of the ear (Alexander, 2021) and firmly situated in the realm of scientific or technical research. However, as highlighted above, more attention is now being paid in the humanities and social sciences to the importance of sound as a subject of research. This has paralleled with the emergence of the ‘materialist turn’ in academia (from textual studies to material culture) with the result that theoretical intersections have also been made between sound studies and materiality studies, with sound even being considered by the likes of Döbereiner (2019) as a ‘thing’ in itself. As scholars have observed:

Sound is not weightless. It is not bodiless, not ethereal, it is not immaterial [...] in any given moment of my or your life manifold vibrations go through our bodies: vibrations that come to us out of the environments we are

situated in. Sound is thoroughly material, it is a vibration, a disturbance in a material continuum (Schulze, 2012, p. 198).

Gershon (2013) reasons that sounds resonate in our bodies, not only in our ears. Sound is something that is felt (Gershon, 2013, p. 258) and the concepts of sonic vibration and resonance are ‘theoretically and materially consequential’ and can therefore be understood as a kind of vibrational ‘affect’:

Theoretically, if everything vibrates, then everything, literally every object (animate and inanimate), ecology (“natural” or “constructed”), feeling, idea, ideal, process, experience, event—has the potential to affect and be affected by another aspect of everything (Gershon, 2013, p. 257).

In Chapter 9, I discussed Hartmut Rosa’s ideas about resonance being something already inherent in humans as an emotive response to each other, but it is interesting also to consider how resonance could be responsible for cultivating connections between voices and bodies in group settings such as those in the keening workshops and how the study of sound might be utilized to understand how ‘individuals or groups conceptualize themselves, others, objects, and ecologies’ (Gershon, 2013, p. 258). Erlmann (2004) stresses that it is important to pay attention to sound and ‘hearing cultures’ because this holds the possibility to find new ways of conceptualizing cultural knowledge and to gain ‘a deepened understanding of how the members of a society know each other’ (Erlmann, 2004, p. 4).

Returning to the vibrational element of vocal sound, Bonenfant (2010) argues that when people send their vocalic bodies out into the world, the ‘vibratory fields’ which are created activates vibrational reactions in the bodies of others. Sound takes us directly into the meatiest of interpersonal dynamics (Bonenfant, 2014). Bonenfant goes on further to describe

this ‘vocalic body’<sup>64</sup> (Bonenfant, 2010, p. 77) which he claims has the effect of a kind of ‘social touch’. Explaining that it is ‘social’ because it reaches out to touch ‘multiplicities of bodies rather than just one or a few’ (Bonenfant, 2010, p. 77).

Kapchan (2016) argues that studying, writing about, and understanding sound has more recently taken centre stage as a tool for social analysis because of the need to theorize about the meaning and the power of ‘collectivities’ in a time of revolutions and major population movements. Kapchan asserts that when we are theorizing about sound, we can better account for fluctuation and movement and that when we pay attention to what we can learn from a ‘sound knowledge’, we can understand more about changing environments (Kapchan, 2016, p. 115). With having what Kapchan terms as an ‘ontology of the auditory’, better understandings are offered to us, not only of unfolding societal events in the contemporary world, but also our understandings of history<sup>65</sup>. In a similar vein, Erlmann (2004) reasons that it is through paying attention to ‘hearing cultures’ that we can gain important insights into how people relate to each other, as well as gaining insight into how societies ‘grapple with the massive changes wrought by modernization, technologization, and globalization’ (Erlmann, 2004, p. 3). Voegelin (2014) suggests that it is ‘a constant effort to access all the fleeting and ephemeral, that which is barely there and yet influences all there is’ (Voegelin, 2014, p. 4) so researching and writing about sound is crucial for a better understanding of the world.

In another vein of thinking, Ong (2002) contends that when sound streams into the body and is expelled by the body, it enables people to access the core of sensation and

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<sup>64</sup> Conceptualised by Connor (2000) in *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>65</sup> Specifically referring to her own research which is concerned with North Africa, the Middle East, and their diasporas.

existence (Ong, 2002, p. 71). Ong further suggests that compared to the other human senses, sound has a unique relationship to interiority and harmony, which are the characteristics of human consciousness and central to human communication (p. 70). Sound, in comparison to vision, according to Ong, is a much more ‘unifying’ sense, because the nature of sound is driven by vibrational energy, and therefore it offers a superior means to understand and speak about the world. Paying attention to vocal sound, in particular, is important according to Ong, because when vocal sounds reverberate, they offer a means to access a deep connection with consciousness and to foster a sense of what he terms ‘the cosmos’:

The centering action of sound (the field of sound is not spread out before me but is all around me) affects man’s sense of the cosmos (Ong, 2002, p. 72).

The terms ‘subconscious’ and ‘consciousness’ were mentioned by some keening workshop participants when they were attempting to describe their lament experience to me:

Lament was working at a higher consciousness level (Joan WA2)

For another participant, the process of lament reached somewhere into what she describes as her ‘subconscious’ which she felt ‘cleansed wounds’ and touched long repressed feelings which she thought were well hidden away:

Lamenting cleansed the wound, the improvisation of song allowed my subconscious to reveal all it needed to, the release was immense, and now I am healing from the inside out. I have been lamenting on it since in various ways I am still in process (Mary Interview 1e April 2019)

From what the workshop participants reported to me, the process of sounding together, and connecting together in the deep way that they did, was important in the very close bonding relationships that were forged. This sense of being able to access something in their

subconscious or on a different plain of consciousness seemed to be very present for the workshop participants and an important part of the experience.

The keening workshop participants, coming to the workshops initially as individuals and with many different stories, found a means through sound, vibration and resonance (bodily and vocally) to communicate with each other at a very deep level. It seems that this resonant communication with each other helped them to understand better their relationships with the world, their cultural heritage both past and present, and potentially about their place in a ‘spiritual cosmos’, which I will discuss in further detail in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

Through the exploration of auditory experiences, scholars in the field of sound studies have been attempting to offer more fitting theoretical explanations for the vocal resonances and vibrations between bodies (both internal and external), arguing that this tells us something important about social relations and social movements. In addition, they demonstrate how access to the ‘other than human’ can be established through sound, and how this can offer better understandings of other forms of knowledge, generally overlooked in Western academic norms. As scholars have observed (Cornish, 2024) there is ever-increasing attention being paid to the significance of sound in academic research and sound studies has continued to develop in the humanities, social sciences, and beyond.

Research in this burgeoning field has proved very useful in the analysis of the data emerging from this study, to be able to discuss and explain the intangible but ‘felt as real’ in the sonic environment of the keening workshops and how those experiences might hold meaning for workshop participants. It was important to analyse this sonic element which arose from the data because it was all these facets of the workshops taken together – the physical, emotional and ‘spiritual’ or ‘otherworldly’ – that made keening such a powerful

experience for workshop participants. Across the different approaches to sound studies, what has been interesting from the perspective of the theme of this chapter is that much of this meaningful experience has been inextricably linked with how the vibrational element of sound can be framed as a means by which keening workshop participants might access what have been described as metaphysical, intangible or spiritual worlds. Research emerging from the field of sound studies has been useful for this thesis to interpret and frame the sounded world and vibrational experiences of the workshops, which seemed to be an important feature for the participants.

## Chapter 11: Spiritual Cosmology

In this chapter, I reflect on the spiritual aspects of the keening workshops. This spiritual dimension added another layer to the participants' experience of the keening workshops which warrants exploration. Here, I specifically delve into the main features of the spiritual cosmology that can be identified in the discourses of the keening workshop participants, and I attempt to communicate their holistic view of the world and reflect on what their experience of lament workshops has to do with it. This spiritual dimension added a layer of meaning that went beyond the emotional release and communal bonding described in previous chapters. This spiritual layer highlights the importance of keening as a means of accessing a transcendent state for the workshop participants.

What was common among many of the participants that attended contemporary lament workshops (both in Finland and Ireland) was their past involvement with a wide range of holistic, self-healing, and group 'wellbeing' style workshops<sup>66</sup> and retreats. Several people also had experience of running and facilitating these kinds of workshops and retreats. As a result of their previous experiences in what has been termed as the 'holistic milieu', participants brought with them a shared discursive terminology around the idea of 'spirituality'. In my discussions with participants during and after the workshops, they often used intangible concepts such as 'healing' and 'spirituality' or 'finding peace' and spoke about having a sense of 'connection' in some way to an 'otherworldly' source. The idea of a spiritual space was referenced:

I can't even remember much of Saturday because it seemed to go into a spiritual space of its own [...] It was so powerful (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

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<sup>66</sup> Meaning all manner of workshops such as sound baths, shamanic training, Ayahuasca experiences, just as some examples.

The embodied experience itself was also described as something that connected them to what some referred to as ‘source’:

You are creating space for source to do its work; it is beyond understanding a lot of the time [...] since the keening I’ve realized how important it is to learn to trust my relationship to spirit [...] source (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

The discussion of keening workshops as a spiritual space is significant because it highlights how the experience was, for some participants, something that connected them to something deeper and more profound.

Terms such as ‘source’ and ‘spirit’ used by the workshop participants (and other similar terms discussed in other chapters) began to appear around the mid-twentieth century at a time when established religions and their practices were increasingly being perceived as too dogmatic, overly restrictive, and irrelevant in a modern world (Sutcliffe, 2003). Around this time a shift in thinking began to emerge which veered towards individualism, self-identity and the ‘self’ in contrast to the societal norms of the time (Sutcliffe, 2003). In the academic study of religions, this shift was initially categorized under the umbrella term ‘New Age’, which, as discussed previously, was an attempt by scholars of the era to describe what was a rather unwieldy movement, consisting of largely disorganised groupings of people who were exploring ‘alternative’ belief systems away from hegemonic, institutionalised religions.

From the 1990s onwards, the term ‘New Age’ came to denote a ‘loose, hybrid, popular culture of “spirituality”’ (Sutcliffe, 2014, p. 5). However, it has been a much-debated term because it has been consistently difficult to define and categorize: ‘‘New age’ is among the most disputed of categories in the study of religion in terms of agreeing content and boundaries’ (Sutcliffe & Gilhus, 2014, p. 1). As a result, the term has largely fallen out of favour as a categorisation, but it is still a useful and necessary term to be able to explain how

a new ‘age’ of thinking about the self, and self-identity, transpired (Sutcliffe & Gilhus, 2014). The forms of practices and organisations which developed out of that ‘New Age’ milieu, held an appeal for people because it had the potential to allow them to form a self-identity that diverged from the social norms and expectations (Chen, 2014, p. 229).

Despite all its nuances, however, what appears to be consistently synonymous with ‘New Age’ and with the form of thinking about the self that seems to come under this umbrella, is the usage of the term ‘spiritual’ or ‘spirituality’. This term, although also itself notoriously difficult to define because it straddles both the religious and non-religious, has endured, becoming widespread in the Global West and is generally understood to describe how people feel something sacred or divine at a personal level, however that is perceived by the individual. There has also been the coexistence under the New Age umbrella of terms such as ‘esoteric’ and ‘paranormal’ to express other forms of ‘spiritual’ experience (Sutcliffe, 2014, p. 5):

The possibility of meaningful demarcation and comparison becomes incrementally more difficult each time “new age” is used with a slightly different qualification, or as it oscillates in use with surrogate terms like “alternative” and “holistic”, or – as is increasingly the case – it dissolves into popular “spirituality” discourses (Sutcliffe, 2014, p. 27).

The ‘holistic milieu’, as defined by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) to describe this zeitgeist, is today made up of a loose assemblage of sometimes organised, but mostly disorganised, groups of people, collectively referred to as ‘spiritual seekers’ or ‘new age seekers’ (Sutcliffe, 2014, p. 30). These terms, describing the kinds of people who circulate in this milieu, denote, in a very general sense, those who are said to be on a personal journey or quest, ‘searching’ for the meaning of life, and who explore alternative pathways in the hope of finding their true ‘self’ or ‘soul’. This quest can be undertaken by taking part in all manner of ritual and spiritual practices.

This disparate grouping of people and organisations and their activities have also come under the umbrella of what is, again, a much-debated term of ‘New Age Spirituality’ (Sutcliffe, 2003) and has also been described as ‘popular spirituality’ (Knoblauch in Sutcliffe, 2014). What has also been termed as ‘self-spirituality’<sup>67</sup> and ‘self-religion’ has, according to Shu-Chuan Chen (2014), been at the heart of a New Age ideology, where a strong focus is on ‘going within’ to find an eternal truth, with the idea that one must ‘let go’ of anything in their lives that prevents them from accessing that truth (Chen, 2014, p. 229).

In another vein of thinking which emerged from the concept of a new spirituality was the idea of being able to access a sense of ‘oneness’ and a sense of ‘self’ by finding a connection to, or making a communication with, a spiritual ‘other’. For the groups that anthropologist Susan Greenwood has researched (her research focuses on magic and consciousness), this ‘other’ can be accessed through connecting with nature. Greenwood explains that, for these groups, several ‘spiritual ontologies’ are expressed through a valuing of nature, and through developing a ‘magical consciousness’ which she argues has the power to ‘re-enchant the world’ (Greenwood, 2020, p. 7). Part of the process of developing a magical consciousness, according to Greenwood, is learning to see the natural world as vital and alive and seeing it in animistic<sup>68</sup> terms (p. 9). Nature spirituality, as defined by Greenwood:

Above all, it comprises a ‘holistic’ alternative way of seeing the world, one that is frequently rooted in an awareness of the spirituality of the everyday, the earth, body with all its attendant thoughts, feelings and emotions, and a sense of the interconnectedness of it all (Greenwood, 2020, p. xi).

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<sup>67</sup> A term coined Paul Heelas to describe this brand of spirituality that looks to the internal world of the person rather than the external hegemonic societal discourse for answers (Heelas, 1996, p. 2)

<sup>68</sup> The term ‘Animism’ stems from the Latin word *anima* meaning ‘breath’, ‘life’ or ‘soul’ and was coined by nineteenth-century anthropologist Edward Tylor, which suggests the idea that the world is inspired (Greenwood, 2020, p. ix).

The holistic way of seeing the world that Greenwood identifies among followers of nature spirituality is similar to the spiritual cosmology I identified among the keening workshop participants and the way they discussed their experiences in the workshops and the subsequent healing process, could also be described as a ‘spirituality of the everyday’ in Greenwoods terms.

Another similarity I identified between the discourses of modern keeners and other contemporary spiritualities is the use of the term ‘vibrations’. It is interesting to note here that the language characteristic of New Age Spirituality, and the vocabulary being used to describe this type of spirituality, also uses the term ‘vibration’:

[I]f the New Age is a religious discourse community with a characteristic language that identifies it, a large part of its vocabulary concerns the ‘universe’ (read God?) and its healing ‘energies’, ‘polarities’ and their balancing, ‘charkas’ and their activation, ‘vibrations’ and the need for their harmonization (Albanese, 1992, p. 75).

This ties in with the discussion in Chapter 10 on the connections that were found between the keening workshops and the topic of vibration. As mentioned above, the majority of the keening workshop participants were very familiar with the terms and vocabulary which surround them within the holistic milieu.

Today, the trend for searching and finding one’s ‘inner spirituality’ or one’s true ‘self’ is quite a commonplace endeavour (Mikaelsson, 2014), and the associated terminology is evident in everyday contexts where language such as ‘searching for an inner truth’ or exploring ways to communicate with ‘spirit’ or ‘source’ might be used. A person attempting to seek inner peace and find their true ‘authentic self’ can easily try to access this in many

ways through participating in all sorts of activities, such as group healing/self-help sessions<sup>69</sup>, sound baths, making art, creating music, practicing yoga, and other similar activities. Spiritual and mental wellbeing is also very much seen as something that is important in sport and in business and for the enhancement of employee wellbeing. In response to this trend a huge ‘new age commercialism’ now exists where markets have exploded to feed the demand for self-help books and alternative medicine, ‘spiritual tourism’, feng shui-influenced architecture, house decoration and a multitude of other commercialized activities (Mikaelsson, 2014, p. 160).

As mentioned above, participants of the Irish workshops could be described as ‘multiple seekers’ who dip in and out of the ‘spiritual marketplace’ (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 205), and are familiar with the business of participating in, and providing services to, that marketplace. The lament workshops in Ireland and Finland fit into this commercial wellness category. The Irish keening workshops were marketed as a commercial activity (as outlined in Chapter 2 and Chapter 7) and organised by someone who runs wellbeing events ordinarily as a business. Some of the lament workshops in Finland are also run as commercial ventures with fee-paying clients as participants. As discussed in Chapter 4, Grimes (2000) draws attention to the problematic issue of unregulated ritual practitioners into question and discussions around how accountability can be demanded and monitored. Grimes suggests that more attention needs to be paid to the issue of how this competitive modern ritual market highlights the fostering of a ‘capitalism of the spirit’ (Grimes, 2000, p. 309).

What seems common amongst these disparate groupings of ‘seekers’ both in the past and the present is a belief that there is a connectedness and an interrelatedness of all things

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<sup>69</sup> These are some examples as the potential list is inexhaustible as almost any activity can be said to have a spiritual element.

in the world between the human ‘self’ and other beings, whether they are seen or ‘unseen’ (relating to the spiritual world) (Greenwood, 2020, p. 7). In keening workshops, although participants weren’t engaging in the practice of magic or with nature spirituality, it seems that they hold a similar holistic view of the universe as an interconnected whole, where physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions are intertwined. The keening workshop concept was a fresh new offering in the ‘pick n’ mix’ environment of commercialised new age spirituality. It is worth noting that today there is a wide and globalised interest in what is termed ‘Celtic spirituality’.

### Altered States, Spirituality and Sound Studies

In relation particularly to the investigation of religious experience, scholars have observed connections between group activities and the potential for reaching ‘altered states’ of consciousness (I address this to some extent in Chapter 10). People in groups who move, sing (or cry) together often report that they experience something like an ‘altered state’ or feel they have had an ‘out of body’ experience in this situation (Hackett, 2011; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003). Physical synchrony in the performance of dance rituals, for instance, is a much observed and reported phenomenon in anthropological field studies, where it appears that the experience of moving in synchrony together with sound and dance, termed sometimes as ‘entrainment’<sup>70</sup>, brings people into an ecstatic state and also fosters social rapport and group cohesion (Ellamil, et al., 2016). However, what is considered as lacking in the field of study of religions are studies on sound and vibration and what they might have to do with reaching altered states or some sense of a spiritual experience (Hackett, 2011). There are a

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<sup>70</sup> Entrainment is a theory taken from biology and psychology which has also been applied in social situations to describe how bodies that are moving closely together fall into a synchronized rhythm or move in the same way due, as some scholars suggest, to oscillatory vibrations between them; see Kim, et al. (2019) for more detail.

few examples of this kind of research, for instance, Judith Becker's (2004) study of how people reach 'trance' states with ritual music, drumming and dancing, and Takahashi & Olaveson's (2003) aforementioned study on trance states experienced at raves. However, there have been calls for more analytical attention to be paid to the perceived powers of sound as a means to reach and interact with the spirit world (Hackett, 2011, p. 453).

Anthropologist Helen Cornish agrees, and proffers that studies of sound, vibration, and spiritual experiential dimensions are valuable research tools because:

By listening in more multisensory ways, it becomes possible to recognize how musicking and sound are integral elements of engagement with spirited cosmologies, in and out of ritual contexts (Cornish, 2024, p. 10).

In her ethnographic study of musical and sounding practices of a Pagan circle (group), she found that soundscapes generated by the group altered the states of consciousness for those taking part. She discusses religious or ecstatic feeling and explores the spiritual connection found within emotive soundscapes (rhythmic voices, humming, chanting, or percussion) and sonic vibration, and how these 'bridge the human and other-than-human' (Cornish, 2024, p. 5). As explained above, terminology used by keening workshop participants included terms such as 'spiritual' and 'source' and 'consciousness', and it was a 'vibrational experience' described and felt by participants which was identified by them as the thing that connected them to that that other-than-human-world, describes as follows by one participant:

It's so beautiful that the lament seems to be working at a higher consciousness level. With our personal release energetically we release the symbiotic metaphysical cords that we have kept holding that relationship in that space. When we release, we change the space between us perhaps... (Mary WA1 May 2019)

## Sacred and Magical Properties of Lament

Given the transcendent experiences people in the lament revival movement have described, it is worth considering them against the background of possible magical and sacred qualities of traditional forms of lament experience. It was an interesting exercise to examine descriptions of historical lament again following my own lament workshop experiences to try to find any mentions of spiritual or altered states, but evidence of this was scant (at least in English language publications); the notable exceptions that I am aware of are Wilce (2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2017) as I mentioned before in his on historical and contemporary forms of Finno-Karelian lament and also Tolbert (1990) who briefly mentions the how Karelian lamenters demonstrate spiritual power through emotional expression (Tolbert, 1990, p. 90).

To recap on this here, Wilce tells us that in the Karelian lament tradition of the past, be it a lament for a wedding or a funeral, there is evidence to indicate that the skilled lamenter's powerful emotions were taken to be signs of a kind of 'trance' in which the lamenter took on the role of a female 'shaman' (Wilce, 2017, p. 242). He describes how the 'sacred' or 'magical' properties in the old laments were important when judging their efficacy and how Karelian villagers evaluated local lamenters in terms of the spiritual after-effects of their laments. For instance, had the past marriages she had 'sanctified' with her laments stood the test of time? Did the families of the lamented deceased continue to 'remain free of any signs that an unsatisfied dead soul was still close at hand and causing trouble?' (p. 241). Tolbert (1990) who analysed the structure and form of Karelian lament found that certain 'micro-tonal and micro-rhythmic' cried expression in certain parts of the lament indicate that the lamenter had entered a trance-like state and had made connection with the spiritual realm (Tolbert, 1990, p. 90). The Irish keening cry of the past, as discussed briefly previously, had 'magical' associations and dangerous connotations due to the connection with spell words. Associations with 'spirits' and the 'otherworld' are inferred by recent scholarship (as

discussed in Chapter 3). In a similar way to the Karelian lament tradition, the keen and the keener were understood in traditional Irish cosmology to assist the soul of the deceased over to the ‘other side’ to join the ancestors in the spirit world. It is possible that when the participants of the Irish keening workshops were informed about this speculative aspect of keening in the past, this cosmology fitted in with their own spiritual cosmology. They may, therefore, have constructed a connectedness with the past practice of keening and their own contemporary interpretation of it.

### Spiritual Energies as a Healing Force

The concept of lament being the mechanism responsible for stimulating a healing process was present in the participant discourses coming from the keening workshops and from the Finnish workshops and seemed to fuse with wider discourses around spirituality. The terms ‘healing’ and ‘wellbeing’, however, do not seem to appear in any of the past discourse around keening or other forms of traditional lament (at least that I am aware of). It could be that this particular usage of ‘healing’ as a term and concept only really emerged in the 1970s New Age era when questions of self-identity became more prevalent, as outlined above. Since contemporary healing practices tend to concentrate on the self, there is a focus on issues of emotions and embodiment and their relation to healing the self and healing bodily disease and illness as well as healing emotional and spiritual dis-ease. The concept of healing as understood in the contemporary world also can have a wider focus and can encompass things like healing the Earth, healing the ‘dis-ease’ of the capitalistic workplace (Chen, 2014, p. 229). A general impression I got in conversations that I had with some of the workshop participants was that accessing the spiritual or the ecstatic during the workshops was part of where the ‘healing’ happened for them.

Exploring the spiritual cosmological discourse which emerged from this study has shown that lament revival is of interest to people who feel drawn towards healing practices

as understood in the context of the ‘holistic milieu’ which exists in the contemporary world. Despite its problems as a category, Chen (2014) tells us that ‘the most prominent medium in which New Age helps participants deal with the problem of self-identity is through embodied healing practices’ (Chen, 2014, p. 229), and it seems that keening workshops sit firmly under this umbrella. In engaging with lament workshops, spiritual seekers have now found another wellbeing/healing tool and they experiment with finding ways to knit what they know of this old tradition into their existing practices. Through engaging with emotional and embodied experiences such as lament workshops, participants find a form of ‘self-healing’ and a deeper sense of self identity. Keening allowed participants to engage with their cultural heritage and see themselves as part of a larger tradition, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. However, the keening workshops were also about connecting with the divine or the otherworldly. This connection provided a sense of comfort and reassurance, and the belief that they were part of a larger, sacred process.

## Conclusions

This thesis investigated the motivations behind the renewed interest in the Irish ritual lament tradition of keening, and brought into focus the ways in which it is being adapted to contemporary contexts. At its core, the research is about the potential of using the old keening ritual tradition in a reimagined form, and to highlight the cultural, spiritual, and therapeutic impact of such an endeavour. It was driven by my desire to see if keening reimagined could be useful in the contemporary world. The main aim was to explore various aspects of contemporary lament practices and to make sense of why it was of interest to people who are attempting to reimagine these traditions that had fallen out of use.

Through a detailed analysis of ethnographic data collected from lament workshop participants, this thesis demonstrates how, in engaging with the lament workshop and reinterpreting the lament tradition, participants discovered a new way to think about their relationship with the world and themselves. It also shows how this engagement with Finnish lament or with Irish keening has impacted on people's individual and collective wellbeing and fostered a sense of healing for them. The research provides comprehensive examination of the mechanisms at play when people seek to reconnect to, and reimagine, an old lament tradition. To my knowledge, this thesis is the first in-depth study of keening in a workshop or retreat format using improvisation as a compositional tool. It is also the first study to consider the significance of the vibrational and sonic elements of such an endeavour. This chapter provides a summation of the thesis and its contribution to knowledge. The first section reflects on the key findings and their significance whilst the second outlines some of the limitations of the thesis and suggestions for future research. Finally, I offer some personal reflections on the research experience.

To recap, the following questions were central to the focus of this thesis:

1. Can an experimental reimagining of keening in Ireland serve as a healing practice, in a similar way to the Finnish example?
2. What would happen if the Finnish model of the Karelian lament workshops were adapted to the Irish context? What could this tell us about the Irish cultural context?
3. What might workshop participants' experiences of the embodied aspects of sound and vibration be in the process of reimagining keening, and what role could this play in their interpretations of keening and their responses to it.

### Reflection on the findings and their contribution to Scholarship

This thesis draws attention to how keening workshops have a profound effect on participants, fostering a sense of communal cohesion and emotional bonding and a sense of being 'healed'. Chapter 3 first outlines the historical trajectory of the keening tradition, why it fell out of use and why it might be useful for people to reimagine it in the contemporary world. Chapter 4 then highlights why it is important in the contemporary world to be able to reimagine and repurpose old rituals and traditions such as keening. Chapter 5 outlines the revival of the Karelian lament tradition in Finland and how successful it has been as a healing tool and explains how that example inspired me to think about developing the Irish keening revival idea as a research topic. Chapter 6 documents my visit to Helsinki to further investigate the lament revival happening there while Chapter 7 relays the step-by-step development of the idea for this PhD project which led to the setting up of the Irish keening workshops as part of the research.

Chapters 8 and 9 highlighted how in the analysis of the ethnographic data I found that in the process of engaging with what is known today of the keening tradition participants felt that they developed a sense of belonging to an ancient history which had an emotional and cultural significance for them. Learning about the historical tradition of keening helped

participants feel more connected to their cultural heritage and helped them in linking themselves to what they perceived as a long lineage of collective mourning, and that this seemed to enhance their sense of belonging in the world. This connection extended to a sense of belonging to what they consider to be a historically traumatized nation and a feeling that they had a shared cultural history as a group.

The workshops also evoked for the participants a sense that they possessed ‘generational memory,’ and felt they were tapping into a lost knowledge passed down through their ancestors. A sense of carrying ‘generational trauma’ was significant also, with participants discussing how they felt that historical traumas, such as famine and colonialism, have been passed down through the generations. This new interpretation of keening in the workshop and retreat setting was seen as an effective way to address and heal these traumas both for themselves and potentially at a much larger communal, even national, level. The idea of being able to reconnect with cultural traditions to address both personal and collective traumas was very important to the workshop participants. I explained how the keening workshops provided a unique and powerful healing experience for participants, characterized by deep emotional release. The theoretical frameworks of collective effervescence, *communitas*, and resonance were helpful in understanding the transformative effects of these workshops. Having a shared experience at the workshops at such a deep level contributed to strong bonds and connections made between some participants that have continued long after the workshops, indicating a lasting impact on the lives of the participants.

Chapter 10 discussed how studying sound, voice, and vibration is useful to understand social relations and cultural knowledge and I expanded further on how this connects to the keening workshops. During the course of the research, I found that what participants learned about the cosmology associated with the tradition seemed to integrate easily with their own spiritual cosmology. There was a sense for some participants that a connection to a spiritual

realm was discovered at the workshops and thereby felt as a vibrational phenomenon when vocal sounding together as a group. Research has shown that auditory resonant communication of this kind between people helps them to understand better their relationships with the world, and it has the potential to connect people to their cultural heritage both past and present. The sonic phenomenon felt at the workshops also informed participants about their place in a 'spiritual cosmos' as participants often use terms like 'healing', 'spirituality', and 'connection to source' to describe their experiences at the workshops. This finding was detailed in Chapter 11.

The physical and non-physical phenomena, particularly the vibrational state experienced by participants, connected them to an intangible sphere, or an unknown force or energy. This sense of being able to access something in their subconscious or on a different plain of consciousness seemed to be very present for the workshop participants and an important part of the experience. The vibrational element of sound in keening workshops was an important layer in the experiences of some participants and it seemed to be an important factor in reaching spiritual or ecstatic states, which were seen as an integral part of the healing process for them. The sonic and vibratory vocal phenomena felt by participants at the workshops seemed to help them to access a level of communication with each other and self-healing at a deep level.

The project demonstrates that keening was a means used in a modern context in retreat or workshop settings which had professed beneficial use for the participants. Participants were able to connect with the old tradition in a deep emotional way and in a culturally meaningful way. As a healing tool, keening aligns with contemporary understandings of emotional and mental wellbeing, where expression and release of emotion are considered crucial for health. It also demonstrates that the Finnish model of lament workshops developed by the founders of the *Äänellä Itkijät* association could work in a similar way and have

meaningful outcomes for participants. Participants claimed that the workshops provided significant therapeutic benefits as the process of creating and performing laments allowed them to process their grief and trauma in a supportive environment free of conditioned shame and without fear of ‘letting go’. The communal aspect of the workshops fostered a sense of social bonding and empathy. Sharing personal stories and witnessing others’ grief created a supportive community, which is a crucial element in the healing process. The enthusiastic response from participants and the demand for more workshops indicated a strong interest in reviving and repurposing keening and the positive feedback highlighted the effectiveness of the workshops.

Overall, the project has shown that it is indeed possible to reawaken, reimagine, and repurpose the tradition of keening as a contemporary healing tool and so much more besides. The reimagining of the keening process has without doubt demonstrated that this denigrated women’s tradition, stigmatized for centuries and viewed from some perspectives as inconsequential, insignificant and unimportant, holds immense value to the mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing of people in the contemporary world.

#### [Contribution to the Field of Sound Studies within the Study of Religions](#)

This research is a valuable contribution to the field due to its innovative theoretical framework, which uniquely combines perspectives from the study of religions and sound studies. By way of these theoretical schemas, the study offers a comprehensive analysis of the reimagining of Irish lament with a nuanced discussion of the cultural forms, expressions, and dynamics that emerged from the study, providing new insights into the practice of keening and lament in general. The originality of this theoretical framework lies in its ability to draw connections between different academic disciplines, offering a fresh perspective on the Irish keening tradition that has not been previously explored. This interdisciplinary

approach not only enriches the understanding of keening but also highlights the importance of sound and memory in cultural practices. By doing so, the research challenges traditional visual-centric methodologies and emphasizes the significance of auditory experiences in ethnographic research.

Overall, this study makes a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge on the Irish lament tradition and on lament in general by providing a novel theoretical lens through which to examine contemporary practices, which situates the research firmly within the fields of sound studies and the study of religions.

#### Importance of the research to the field of sound studies within the study of religions

This research is important to the field of sound studies within the study of religions as, firstly, sound studies have traditionally been marginalized in favour of visual studies within the study of religions. By emphasizing sound as part of the findings in this project, this research challenges the visual-centric bias and highlights the importance of auditory experiences.

Secondly, sound-focused research has historically largely been considered unscientific. However, with advancements in acoustics, musicology, and anthropology, there is now a growing interest in the physicality and corporeality of sound. This research aligns with these emerging trends, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of ‘religious’ or spiritual experiences. Scholars like Ong (2002) and Voegelin (2014) argue that sound is crucial for understanding human existence and sensation and this research supports the idea that sound can provide deeper insights into spiritual experiences, which are often ephemeral and difficult to capture through visual means alone. The study integrates perspectives from various disciplines including anthropology, musicology, and philosophy to develop a more complex and experiential theory of the body and sound. This

interdisciplinary approach enriches the field of sound studies and its application to the field of study of religions.

This research stands out for its unique examination of lament as a therapeutic tool and its innovative approach to contemporary lament practices through the perspective of sound studies within the study of religions. By doing so, it not only builds upon existing literature and knowledge about lament but also provides valuable insights into the workings of modern spirituality, ritual, healing practices, and cultural dynamics.

### Impact

The production of this research is timely, because it demonstrates the interest among people in reawakening and repurposing the tradition of keening and shows that people are eager to contribute to the preservation and revival of an important past cultural practice. The study documents how the rich heritage of Irish lamentation has not been lost but adapted and kept alive in contemporary contexts. The research is also important in demonstrating how the keening workshops provided participants with a unique means of processing grief and trauma, offering an alternative to conventional therapeutic methods. This aspect of the research emphasizes the importance of communal grieving practices in enhancing social cohesion and emotional support. As we navigate personal stress, global traumas and our worries about pressing existential threats to life such as climate change, people are looking for new – more positive, more social ways of being-in-the-world and trying to find some kind of way to heal themselves and the planet. The bonding that happens with like-minded people in a keening workshop serves also as a means for individuals to feel like they are part of a close-knit community and not alone in these concerns. The reimagined form of keening offers people a place to freely and openly express those fears and worries through the sound of their voices, and crying and wailing with their bodies, in a way that they need not feel shame or embarrassment about.

This research bridges multiple disciplines, including anthropology, musicology, psychology, and cultural studies. By doing so, it provides a holistic understanding of keening, enriching our knowledge of its emotional, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions. The positive feedback and significant emotional benefits reported by participants provide empirical evidence supporting the viability of keening as a contemporary therapeutic/well-being tool. This evidence can inform future research on cultural revival movements and on therapeutic and spiritual approaches. Generally, the study highlights the modern relevance of keening. It shows that traditional practices can be meaningfully integrated into contemporary life, providing valuable cultural and emotional resources.

Overall, this research is important because it not only documents the preservation and revitalization of a significant cultural tradition but also explores its potential to address contemporary emotional and social needs. It and enriches our understanding of the interaction between culture, emotion, and healing.

### Limitations and Future Research

The space limitations of a PhD-length thesis forced painful excisions of areas of the research that I wished to expand upon but which I mention here as potential related research topics for future research. One area that went beyond the scope of my thesis was the possible connections that could be made between keening practices and the use of metaphor in the creative process. I sometimes found in keening workshops where individuals came with inaccurate stories they had learned or made up about the keening tradition and those then became part of storytelling and performances which mixed fiction, wild stretches of the imagination, and interpretations of mythological tales. The many routes I could have gone down is testament to the nature of ethnographic research and the rich qualitative data that can be amassed.

Another interesting topic is how the crying voice in a keening workshop mirrors the original relationship between mother and child and how this might happen because the resonances and the vibrations felt while emotionally vocalizing are something ‘primordial’ and innate that is inbuilt in humans. I touched on this in my conference paper titled ‘Crying together: mother and child resonance and a sense of ‘belonging’ found in modern Irish laments that I presented at the ‘International Conference of the Lament Tradition’ in Helsinki, Finland in 2023.

Another interesting topic that went beyond the scope of my current project is how orally transmitted rituals and traditions could have connections with quantum physics. Mark Higgins (2021) discusses quantum physics in the context of Indigenous knowledge in his work, exploring the relationship between Western modern science and Indigenous ways of knowing, particularly within science education. He uses quantum metaphysics to address the ways settler colonial logics persist in science education and to highlight the ethical, epistemological, and ontological implications for including Indigenous knowledges (Higgins, 2021). This would be an interesting area for exploration in relation to lament practices.

#### Limitations of ethnographic research

While ethnographic research using participant observation can be a powerful method for understanding keening groups, as mentioned in the Methodology chapter it does come with several limitations. For instance, the researcher’s presence can influence the behaviour of the group, and the researcher’s interpretations may be biased by personal beliefs and experiences. Ethnographic research is time consuming and participant observation requires a significant time investment to build trust and gather comprehensive data. As mentioned previously, researchers may become emotionally involved with the participants especially in such a highly emotive group environment as the keening workshops, which can affect objectivity

and the ability to maintain professional boundaries. Longitudinal ethnographic studies might also better reveal how external factors such as societal changes, technological advancements, and shifts in community values influence its practice into the future and might be better at capturing real-world, nuanced and ongoing changes and adaptations of rituals and traditions.

#### Reflecting on the ethnographic method

I conducted my research by participating in Irish and Finnish lament workshops and by drawing on both historical research and fieldwork. I collected data from interviews, surveys and email and phone communications. The project was centred around keening workshops and retreats which encouraged participants to find their own expression of keening and reimagining its practice. Whilst there were challenges encountered in such a reimagining of this tradition, especially in the context of concerns about cultural appropriation and the complexities of adapting traditional practices to contemporary society, it was interesting to look at the work of other researchers using the ethnographic method who have also examined how people in certain communities are reclaiming and repurposing older traditions for use in contemporary contexts.

Focusing on the revitalization of Sami spirituality and rituals, the work of Siv Ellen Kraft, for instance, draw attention to how modern Sami communities are reclaiming and reinventing their spiritual practices. In an examination of the Isogaisa festival in Northern Norway Kraft demonstrates how in reconnecting with their shamanic traditions at this event Sami people can express their cultural identity.

Moroccan Sufi practices are the focus of Deborah Kapchan's work where she offers insights into how rituals are transformed and maintained in diaspora communities. Her research on the aesthetics of Sufi music and ritual in France, for instance, reveals how these practices can be adapted to new cultural contexts while preserving their spiritual essence. In

her use of ethnographic methods Kapchan's work demonstrates the resilience and reinvention of spiritual traditions through her exploration of the sensory and performative aspects of ritual.

In her book, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, Catherine Albanese's ethnographic study on American 'metaphysical religion' explores how various spiritual traditions in America have evolved and adapted over time. Her work highlights how they incorporate elements from different cultures and respond to changing social and spiritual needs. She demonstrates how rituals are continually reinvented fluidity and how creativity is inherent in ritual practices.

Ethnographic research, as undertaken by these scholars for example, highlights how communities adapt their rituals in response to changing environments. It captures the sensory and performative dimensions of rituals, often overlooked by other research methods, and includes personal and community narratives that enrich our understanding of the emotional and social significance of rituals. Ethnographic research gives us a more nuanced understanding of the cultural and historical contexts in which rituals are practiced.

#### Interdisciplinary Potential of the Study of Keening

Research on keening offers a multitude of opportunities for interdisciplinary research as it intersects with psychology, anthropology, history, musicology, and even neuroscience. From the perspective of psychology, as an intense expression of grief, keening provides potential for understanding vocal expression and physical embodiment of emotion. Also, in-depth psychological studies could explore the specific therapeutic benefits of keening, particularly its effects on grief processing, mental health, and emotional resilience. After learning about the usage of metaphor in historical laments in both Finland and Ireland and trying it out in a modern context in the lament workshops that I attended, it was interesting to discover that he

usage of metaphor is commonly employed in contemporary psychotherapy. Witzum (1988), for instance, describes the applications of metaphor in psychotherapeutic practice and demonstrates the efficacy of metaphor in the treatment of cases of traumatic and highly anxiety-provoking issues. The use of metaphor in lament and how it might relate to psychotherapeutic practices could be explored further.

Neuroscience research could explore how the brain processes grief, sound, and communal emotional experiences, shedding light on keening's role in emotional catharsis. This includes examining its effects on the nervous system, stress release, trauma processing, and social bonding. Researchers can study how specific vocal tones, particularly loud guttural sounds such as those made while keening, evoke emotional responses. The ritual and sound element of keening make it a fascinating subject for an ethnomusicology study. Historically associated with women, keening offers insights into gender dynamics and women's agency. Gender studies research can explore how keening provided a space for women's voices and how this space was negotiated within patriarchal societies. Performance studies can examine keening as a ritual and expressive performance, focusing on the embodiment of grief. Integrating keening into therapeutic practices, such as drama or music therapy, could help individuals process grief and trauma.

As already mentioned, a longitudinal study of how keening is being practiced or being referred to, or responded to, in a variety of settings, not just as specific workshops (as was the focus of this thesis) would be interesting. Longitudinal studies following the participants in the keening workshops over time could provide insights into the lasting effects of the practice on individuals' emotional wellbeing and social connectedness. Studies on how lament could be utilized in these ways as a response to many of today's ills and worries would be interesting to explore, and for instance an interesting development that has arisen from my involvement in this research is that I have been asked to speak about keening in regard to

music and art projects, and to participate in projects that are dealing with ‘eco-grief’ as the subject. The effectiveness of keening as a tool for long-term healing can be explored and it shows potential to become a sustainable part of modern therapeutic and wellness practices.

Comparative studies between keening and other forms of lament across different cultures could offer valuable insights into cross-cultural vocal mourning rituals. Such research could examine the social, cultural, and psychological functions of lament and how they can be adapted or reimaged in contemporary contexts.

By necessity, I had to restrict my discussion of the language element of contemporary keening workshops. My research found that using the Irish language in a keening workshop was very important for some participants including myself. Keening is deeply emotional and personal so its use could have a profound impact on both language revitalization and emotional healing. Using Irish in this context can create a strong emotional bond with the language so engaging in keening in Irish could possibly allow people to reconnect with their cultural heritage. This could foster a sense of pride and identity, encouraging more people to learn and use the language. Finding healing through the Irish language would be another interesting area to explore as the act of keening can be cathartic, helping individuals process grief and emotions and doing this in Irish can reinforce the language’s role in personal and communal wellbeing. Using Irish in modern, emotionally resonant contexts can challenge the perception of the language as outdated or irrelevant. It shows that Irish is a living language capable of expressing deep emotions and by demonstrating the emotional and cultural richness of the Irish language itself.

An area that was not explored in this thesis is the concept of ‘Irishness’ and how it might inform or complicate studies of keening and broader traditions of lament. In contemporary Ireland, the notion of Irish identity is increasingly diverse, with individuals of

many races, ethnicities and/or nationalities holding Irish citizenship. This raises important questions: who is considered Irish today, and how might this expanded definition influence connections to ancient cultural practices such as keening? As discussed in Chapter 8, Herbert J. Gan's (1994) concept of 'symbolic ethnicity' is particularly relevant here. It suggests that individuals can maintain a sense of ethnic identity and pride without sustained cultural immersion. Applying this framework, one might ask whether symbolic connections to Irish heritage could foster meaningful engagement with traditional practices, even among those without ancestral ties to them.

### [Personal reflection on this PhD project](#)

Engaging in the research for this project was a transformative personal journey that profoundly impacted me both personally and professionally. The process of organizing and participating in keening workshops, inspired by the Finnish model, allowed me to explore the depths of human emotion and cultural expression in ways I had not anticipated. Witnessing the powerful effects of keening on participants, including the feelings of belonging, healing, and emotional release, reinforced the significance of this ancient practice in contemporary settings. On a personal level, I have made some lifelong friendships with the people who I have sat with and cried with in lament workshops both in Ireland and Finland during the time of the research project and in several gatherings since. I still have close contacts with some of people from the original keening workshops and have also been invited (as a participant) to several new keening workshop events, some which have had an 'eco-grief' focus and were run by one of the original keening workshop participants. Incidentally, that person has also become involved in the area of death and dying and runs a regular Death Café in West Cork and provides a very important service for people wishing to think about and talk about death and dying. There are many examples such as this where keening workshop participants have embarked on new personal and professional journeys as a direct

result of reconnecting with keening. Several of the participants have worked (and still work) in collaboration with each other on projects that are either inspired by keening, incorporate keening or are connected to end-of-life support work or voice and sound related workshops.

Testament to the originality and unique nature of my research is the fact that during the past number of years I have often been called to give talks about my research at art and music installations and am considered now as one of the Irish specialists in relation to new iterations and interpretations of keening. I do my best to keep abreast of any new developments in the area of lament within and outside of academia. I occasionally post to a Facebook page that was set up by the facilitator of the weekend keening retreat, Tanya Bryan, to pass on any new information that I might find about events and to stay in touch with what people are doing.

The project has also awakened in me a realisation that I have a natural affinity for creative writing using metaphor, which I would like to explore further. It has also given me an interest in returning to the Irish language and actively learning Irish again and has me considering projects which merge lament and Irish language learning. I've considered running a series of lectures around the topic and I have had preliminary discussions with contacts at other universities around running an international conference on lament. I am considering starting a lament association with the idea of naming it 'WAILS' which is an acronym for Worldwide Academic Institute of Lament Studies.

Professionally, this research has solidified my commitment to interdisciplinary approaches, blending anthropology, musicology, and psychology to enrich our understanding of cultural forms. Personally, I have deepened my connection to myself and my family lineage, significantly about my great-great grandmother who was a keener at wakes. It made me realise that keening was in my family's memory/stories, and it is part of this land. Overall,

this journey has been a testament to the enduring power of keening and its relevance in fostering emotional wellbeing and cultural continuity in the contemporary world.

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## Appendix A – Poster for Pilot Keening Workshop at UCC

### ‘Cry until it is ready’

A one-day lament workshop  
with

Tuomas Rounakari  
Tues April 17<sup>th</sup> 2018 in ORB G27

Lament is said to carry ancient wisdom and has been performed as a communal tradition in Ireland, for many centuries. It is a worldwide tradition too, performed during ‘rites of passage’ to release one’s sorrow. Lament involves ‘crying with words’ and involves the singing or humming of self composed verses, while reflecting on challenges in ones’ life and allowing the feelings to flow.

The Irish lament tradition is called ‘Caoine’ or ‘Keening’. It is for the most part a forgotten tradition, however, to learn how it may be re-imagined and employed in modern times, we can look to Finland, where the Karelian lament tradition has seen a revival in the past 20 years. The old Finnish lament practitioners used to advise all those who felt sadness to ‘*cry until it is ready*’. Karelian lament in its modern form, has become a therapeutic tool.

#### The Teacher

Tuomas Rounakari, an ethnomusicologist and a modern day lament teacher in Finland, tells us, that the re-imagining of this old lament tradition helps people to cope with contemporary life challenges. Tuomas has been actively teaching and revitalizing the Karelian lament tradition and together with Karelian native lamenter Pirkko Fihlman, they have created a method that allows anyone to learn and experience the lament as an emotional and creative process.



Tuomas Rounakari <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDGqMhaSmdI/>

#### The Workshop

A lament can be created for any reason which causes sadness or anger or stress, be it grief, abuse or hurt caused even by simple words that we have felt offensive. Today, these and other traumatic life experiences, which might make us sad or angry, are met in solitude. There are few safe, acceptable spaces for people to speak or cry or shout about their sorrows, angers and worries about life (and death), without feeling self conscious and weak.

The experience of a ‘Lament Workshop’ is led by Tuomas. In this workshop, we will learn the basic skill of how to compose and perform our own individual laments. The workshop will be

a safe, sharing space with others, who will hold and witness your heaviness with you. This lament workshop in itself can be seen as another ‘rite of passage’, in that it will become your individual **moving away** from victimhood, shame or stress, into another stage of life where your sadness is verbalized and cried.....*until it is ready...*

Numbers are limited to 12 participants. Please email Marian Caulfield: [marian.caulfield@ucc.ie](mailto:marian.caulfield@ucc.ie) to reserve a place. **Admission is free but a donation would be appreciated**

## **Appendix B – Agenda for the Pilot Workshop at UCC**

### **‘Cry until it is ready’**

A one-day lament workshop

with

Tuomas Rounakari

Tues April 17<sup>th</sup> 2018 in ORB G27 9.15am-5pm

#### **AGENDA**

9:15

Registration and Welcome

09:30 -10:50

- Global and local histories of lament as a dying and reviving genre of culture
- The role of lament for grief work in the past and the present
- Video and sound examples of Irish and Finnish lamenting

10:50 - 11:00 Coffee

11:-12:30

- Lamenting as an emotional and creative process
- Understanding composition ‘free-meter’ and is created.
- Sounding and vocalizing exercises
- Experimentation with Language (Irish or English or other?) and Metaphor to express feelings of sadness and grief

12:30-13:30 Lunch

13:30 -15:00

- Planning and outline your possible theme/s for your lament composition
- Creation of individual laments

15:00 – 15.10 Break

15:10-17:00

- Further development of your final lament

17:00 till close

Feedback on the lament process and potential for further workshops

**Appendix C -Advertising material for weekend keening retreat in  
West Cork**

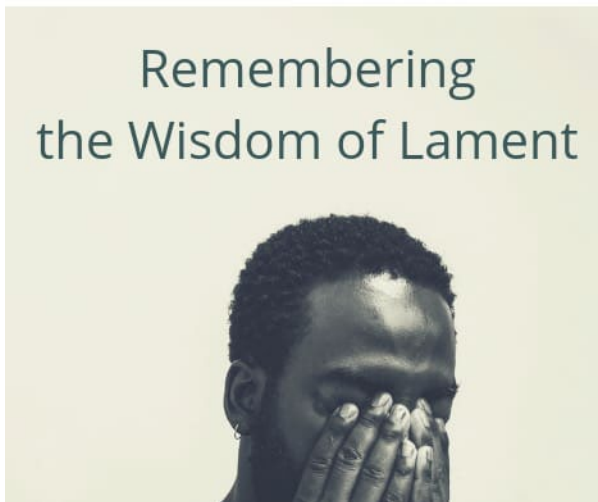
*a time to gather*

**presents**

**RE-IMAGINING KEENING**



Remembering  
the Wisdom of Lament



RESIDENTIAL WEEKEND RETREAT

**3 nights - 3 days**

**April 26-29 2019**

Stunning Setting & Facilities  
HAGAL HOUSE FARM  
West Cork

## **Appendix D - Organizers Workshop Schedule**

### **Arrival Time**

**5pm- 5.30 Room Check- In**

**5.30-6:00 Light Snacks**

**Friday pm**

**6:15-6:30**

- Welcome Address
- Brief Introduction (name where from etc)
- Grounding

**6:30-7pm**

- Global and local histories of lament as a dying and reviving genre of culture
- The role of lament for grief work in the past and imagining what life may have been like for ancestors
- The present situation of lament in Ireland and what is happening in Finland and

**7:00-7:30pm**

- Video and sound examples of Irish and Finnish lamenting

**7:30-8:30 pm**

- Ancestor meditation?

**8:30-9:30pm**

- **Close**
- **& Pictures**

**Breakfast Served**

**Intro (Day 1 – 10 a.m. start) Re-Imagining Keening**

- Welcome address by facilitators and an overview of the process and the framework for the weekend and the idea and goals of the w/s
- Confidentiality including rules for the workshop: respect & no drugs or alcohol etc.
- Facilitators introduce themselves (personal piece)
- Tell the Participants they don't have to introduce themselves, that they can give a temp name if it fits; encourage them to say how they found out about the w/s and how they feel about being here. (Remembering this is not a 'therapy' group, guided not to get 'into' the telling of their personal story right now). Find out their 'expectations'.

**At this point create map of names (intimacy of being remembered allows for safety)**

- CLEANSING THE SPACE AND ENCOURAGE EVERYONE TO SYMBOLICALLY CLEANSE THEMSELVES OF EVERYTHING THAT DOES NOT SERVE THEM (SELF-SABOTAGE etc.)
- Warm up exercise: to be discussed –Bonding to ease the tension and opportunity to talk about VIBRATION and full spectrum of how it manifests in our human system leading into... the
- history of lamenting, meaning of keening in the past and discussion on what it could be today  
(the challenges of re-creating it in English and the group effort to re-imagine it being a collective effort) Talk of shame and loss here, what they can represent and how these aspects might influence the individuals approach to their Personal Lament
  - Lamenting as an emotional and creative process
  - Understanding composition ‘free-meter’ and is created.
  - Sounding and vocalizing exercises
  - Experimentation with Language (Irish or English or other?) and Metaphor to express feelings of sadness and grief

Here we can talk out the aspect of ‘Attachment’, how that reflects this concept of ‘separateness’ – how it’s important to know that being separate, as much as ‘a part of’ is part of the human condition.

- **Break (11.30-12) Tea / Coffee / Healthy snacks**
- Talk openly about the cultural history and current woes of society that may imbue the space.
- Discuss embodiment and do embodiment exercise
- Discuss Loss/grief/anger/frustration/sadness and how lament provides a vehicle to carry this
- Yes/No exercise and discuss how they experienced it
- **Lunch (2-3)**
- Share image selection
- Talk out the poetic element of the lament
- Sing Ochoone together freely, keeping it simple
- Compose lament text from pictures sharing choosing individual topic/theme

(remember, it's important to make space for the pictorial aspect not working for people, some people don't imagine through images)

- Melody exercise (pre-Liminal)
- **Dinner 7pm**
- Group embodiment – i.e. dance and laughter yoga

Reminder that it's best to respect each others space – take time alone if needed and encourage journaling

- Close for the day at 9pm – hang out and bed

## Day 2

### 9.30 a.m. start – breakfast 8 to 9 a.m.

- Morning Song exercise (up to 10.30) singing a STREAM of consciousness (explain the randomness of this, enter into the 'childlike' approach to being playful with sound – give an example that's fun and light to encourage laughter) ... laughter Yoga technique here?
- If the nervousness creates hysteria do a grounding, but remark on the aspect of the same muscles in the body
- Offer an opportunity for people to say how they are perhaps – keep it contained (1 hr)
- Back to back exercise taking turns at offering sound to feel the resonance in the body
- Tea break 11
- Get participants to think of common everyday metaphors. Start the writing process.
- Melody & Embodiment
- **Lunch (1-3) includes time to write a lament**
- Quick check in – talk about how folks are after lunch
- Sing Ochone together freely, keeping it simple
- Witnessing

Key point here is to encourage folks to stay in the their expression of the 'uncomfortable' and not be jumping to 'healing' – the lament is in the 'shadows' and allowing oneself to

### **Dinner 7pm**

- Group embodiment – i.e. dance and laughter yoga

Reminder that it's best to respect each others space – take time alone if needed and encourage journaling

- Close for the day at 9pm – hang out and bed

**Day 3 – Purpose of the morning is to offer grounding for people before they enter back INTO the World**

**This includes breakfast with a departure at noon**

- Ask folks to make note of how they are now, in their bodies, in comparison to where they were when they arrived on Friday
- Discuss A/C options
- Closing circle: How are you feeling as the evening comes to a close, any insights or anything you wish to share

## **Appendix E - Survey Questions, Information Sheets, Consent Forms**

### **Pilot Workshop – Post Workshop Survey Questions**

How was the organisation of the Workshop?

What was your opinion about the location and set up of the workshop room?

Would you have liked to hear more or less about the historical context of this tradition?

Did you find the picture prompts useful for composing your lament theme?

Did you find the exercises useful to put you in the right headspace for composing a lament?

Did you find the use of 'ochone' beneficial during the vocalization of your lament? How/why?

Are there any elements of the workshop they would have liked more or less of? (eg.more/less singing/talking)

Did you feel safe and supported through the lament workshop process?

Give details of how the lament helped you to process feelings and thoughts?

What thoughts and feelings did you have after you left after the workshop?

# Lament Workshop at UCC



## Feedback on Lament Workshop

1 message

caulfield.marian@gmail.com via surveymonkey.com  
<member@surveymonkeyuser.com>  
Reply-To: caulfield.marian@gmail.com  
To: caulfield.marian@gmail.com

Mon, Apr 30, 2018 at 10:57  
PM

Thank you for attending the recent Lament Workshop at UCC recently. This was the very first workshop of its kind in Ireland and your participation was very important to us. We would love to have your feedback on your experience, as it will help us to further fine any tune future workshops.

To this end, we would be really grateful if you to answer some questions in the attached survey which should only take a few minutes but which will be very valuable to us. Thank you

Click the button below to start the survey.

## Information Sheet – Pilot Workshop at UCC

PhD title: Re-imagining Ritual: A study of contemporary forms of Irish lament '*keening*'

Researcher: Marian Caulfield

Address: Study of Religions Department, Office 2.22, O'Rahilly Building, University College Cork

Tel: 00353866023049 E-mail: [marian.caulfield@ucc.ie](mailto:marian.caulfield@ucc.ie)

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this Survey as part of this PhD project. This information sheet and attached consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement in the project and agree to the conditions of your participation.

This PhD thesis investigates contemporary attempts to re-imagine Irish lament as a 'wellbeing' tool. You have attended a Keening Workshops and this is a follow up survey to gather your feedback about how the workshop went for you.

Your participation in the survey is voluntary on your behalf and you have the right to withdraw from the workshop and the study at any time even after the workshop has ended.

You have agreed to allow me to use information from this survey in my final thesis and you have a right to request at any time that I not use any correspondence from you in my final thesis.

Strict anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research process.

All records will be stored securely and safely according to UCC guidelines and eventually destroyed after the termination of the project.

I promise to fully protect your identity and stress again that this is an anonymous survey, so your identity will not be known when the results come back to me.

Your details will not be given to a third party.

In case you have concerns about this workshop or any part of the PhD project you can contact me or the PhD supervisor Dr. Jenny Butler [j.butler@ucc.ie](mailto:j.butler@ucc.ie)

Thank you

Marian Caulfield  
Study of Religions Department  
University College Cork, Ireland

## Weekend Retreat – Sample Interview Questions

Flexibility in the interviews is more important than consistency, participants need to have the freedom to express their views and so the proposed line of questioning only represents a rough guide. Not all questions or areas indicated here was relevant to each participant/interviewee

1. The interviews opened with the question ‘can you tell me how you experienced the workshop?’
2. The ensuing conversation included the following important points: what interested you in Lament as a practice?
3. Did you find the exercises useful
4. What was interesting to you about the vocal sounding in the workshop exercises?
5. How did you find the pictorial prompting exercise?
6. What inspired your lament composition and practice during the workshop?
7. To what extent did you engage with this as an Irish cultural practice?
8. How important was the use of the Irish (or other) language to you?
9. How did the process of lament composition help you to process feelings and thoughts?
10. How much were you interested in the history of lament as a tradition?
11. How important was it to you to try and be authentic to old style of lament
12. Can you say anything about the group ‘sharing’ and ‘witnessing’ element of workshop? Was there anything that surprised you about this workshop?
13. Would you recommend it as a ‘wellbeing’ tool?
14. Is this something that you feel you would like to engage in again, and why?
15. Do you have any other comments about the workshop that you feel are important to mention?

## POST-HOC CONSENT FORM – Finnish Participants

PhD title: The Re-Invention of Lament for the Contemporary World

Researcher: Marian Caulfield

Address: Study of Religions Department, Office 2.22, O’Rahilly Building, University College Cork

Tel: 00353866023049

E-mail: [marian.caulfield@ucc.ie](mailto:marian.caulfield@ucc.ie)

This is an agreement between \_\_\_\_\_ and Marian Caulfield, regarding information from conversations that we might have had in 2017 that may be included in her PhD thesis. On this occasion we discussed how lament has developed in Finland and also about my experience with lamenting and lamenting workshops. Marian may quote parts of email conversations that we might have had about the project, in her final thesis. I am happy for this to be included in Marian’s PhD thesis.

Marian *may/may not* (delete as necessary) identify me by name in any of these references.

Marian will contact me again closer to the date of submission to give me an opportunity to withdraw my participation up to one month before submission date, should I so request.

I understand that all physical and digital data collected by Marian for project will be transferred to digital format and will eventually be destroyed after the termination of the project. All digital data will then be stored securely and safely on UCC’s secure server Microsoft OneDrive. This data will be held securely for ten years.

I understand that if I have concerns about the study, I can turn to Marian Caulfield by contacting her through the details above and she will address my concerns. I understand that I can also contact her PhD supervisor Dr. Jenny Butler - [j.butler@ucc.ie](mailto:j.butler@ucc.ie).

X

---

Participant’s signature:

Date:

X

---

Researcher’s signature:

Marian Caulfield

Study of Religions Department

University College Cork, Ireland

## CONSENT FORM

**Event:**

**Date:**

**Participant Name:**

(Block Capitals)

I consent to participate in a workshop conducted by \_\_\_\_\_ the Orgnaiser and I understand that this workshop is part of a research project organised by Marian Caulfield.

My participation in this workshop is voluntary and I understand that I can take part in the workshop only and am not obliged to take part in the reseach.

I give my consent to being contacted by Marian Caulfield for an interview after the workshop. The interview may be recorded and material from that interview may be used by Marian Caulfield.

Yes/No

I agree that the researcher may quote parts of our email conversations about the project in her final thesis. I understand that the researcher may also use snippets of posts that I might enter in the public Facebook page of the organiser in reference to the workshop. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any of these refernces, or reports or publications using information obtained from this interview or email or public Facebook posts. Yes/No

I understand that all physical data collected for this project will be transferred to digital format and eventually destroyed after the termination of the project. All digital data will be

stored securely and safely on UCC's secure server Microsoft OneDrive. This data will be held securely for ten years.

Yes/No

Even if I give my consent to be part of the study, I can withdraw and discontinue participation from the this up to one month before the thesis submission date. Marian will contact me either directly or through the event organiser, closer to the date of submission to give me an opportunity to withdraw my participation up to one month before submission date.

I undersand that if I have concerns about the workshop or the study I can turn to Marian Caulfield or the organiser \_\_\_\_\_, who will address this.  
Yes/No

I understand that if I experience distress through the process I can turn to the workshop orgnaiser and they will addresss this.

Yes/No

|                         |       |
|-------------------------|-------|
| -----                   | ----- |
| Participant's signature | Date  |

|                        |       |
|------------------------|-------|
| -----                  | ----- |
| Researcher's signature | Date  |

## Information Sheet – Weeekend Workshop

PhD title: Re-imagining Ritual: A study of contemporary forms of Irish lament '*keening*'

Researcher: Marian Caulfield

Address: Study of Religions Department, Office 2.22, O'Rahilly Building, University College Cork

Tel: 00353866023049

E-mail: [marian.caulfield@ucc.ie](mailto:marian.caulfield@ucc.ie)

Thank you for agreeing to take part in a Keening Workshop as part of this PhD project. This information sheet and attached consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement in the project and agree to the conditions of your participation.

This PhD thesis investigates contemporary attempts to re-imagine Irish lament as a 'wellbeing' tool. Keening Workshops are held over one or two days (depending on which event you are part of). It is a group workshop where you will learn to compose your own lament and it will be facilitated by lament teachers Tuomas Rounakari and Tanya Bryan. The facilitator will be assisted by myself in attendance as an assistant and a participant /observer. The workshop may be recorded (I will advise you if it is) and I will be taking 'fieldwork' notes throughout.

Your participation in the workshop and any one-to-one interview with me is voluntary on your behalf and you have the right to withdraw from the workshop and the study at any time even after the workshop has ended.

You have also agreed to allow me to quote parts of our email or social media conversations about the project in my final thesis. You have a right to request at any time that I not use any correspondence from you in my final thesis.

Strict anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research process. Any recorded audio material and transcripts will only be available to the researcher conducting the interview and the PhD Supervisor Dr. Jenny Butler.

All records will be stored securely and safely according to UCC guidelines and eventually destroyed after the termination of the project.

I promise to protect your identity as far as possible. Unless you have agreed to allow me to mention your name or contact details in my thesis or other publications, pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity. Your details will not be given to a third party.

In case you have concerns about this workshop or any part of the PhD project you can contact me or the PhD supervisor Dr Jenny Butler.

Thank you

Marian Caulfield  
Study of Religions Department  
University College Cork, Ireland

## Appendix F - ID key

| Hagal Workshop Keys                                                                 |           |                                 |               |               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Participant Names                                                                   | Pseudonym | WhatsApp (phone calls and msgs) | Survey Monkey | Interview Key |
|    | Mary      | WA1                             | SM1           | Ie            |
|    | Joan      | WA 2                            | SM2           | Ia            |
|    | Karen     | WA3                             | SM3           |               |
|    | Gina      | WA4                             | SM4           | Ib            |
|    | Sorcha    | WA5                             | SM5           |               |
|   | Kerry     | WA6                             |               | Ic            |
|  | Helen     |                                 |               | Id            |
|  |           |                                 |               | If            |

### Pilot Workshop Keys

| Participant Names                                                                   | Pseudonym | Survey Monkey    | Email               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------------|---------------------|
| Anon                                                                                | Rita      | SM6 -            |                     |
| Anon                                                                                | Caoimhe   | SM7 -            |                     |
| Anon                                                                                | Dierdre   | SM8 -            |                     |
| Anon                                                                                | Michael   | SM9 -            |                     |
| Anon                                                                                | Fiona     | SM10 -           |                     |
| Anon                                                                                | Jane      |                  | Email November 2017 |
| <b>Finland</b>                                                                      |           |                  |                     |
| <b>Name</b>                                                                         |           | <b>Pseudonym</b> |                     |
|  |           | Hannele          |                     |
|                                                                                     |           |                  |                     |

## Thematic Analysis of Participant interviews and surveys

### Sound

Lamenting cleansed the wound, the improvisation of song allowed my subconscious to reveal all it needed to, the release was immense, and now I am healing from the inside out. I have been lamenting on it since in various ways I am still in process. If my healing was the size of my thumb I am half way up (Mary Interview 1e April 2019)

Sarah Gealish said ‘you have to have a ‘caoine’ in your voice’ to be a good keener (Helen Interview Id June 2019)

Without words, just sounding, one feels part of a bigger vibration (Joan Interview Ia April 2019)

The magic that happened I suppose was the fact that a group of strangers connected through the vibration of sound (Mary Interview 1e April 2019)

People rocked to and fro ...heaving.....while ‘Ochone’ was being sung or while, felt like raising the vibration (my own fieldnotes)

People in London weren’t interested in the history just the sound element (Helen Interview Id June 2019)

Someone she interviewed told her that the sound of keening hit the back of the neck and something opened in you (Helen Interview Id June 2019)

Suggestion to read ‘Fearless Speech’ Foucault

Sound can enact a tradition, be a site of subversion, stir up catharsis, is performed ideas (ni Siochan interview)

### Fear of letting go

Sense of danger/potential for out of control (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

There was a nervousness about our personal laments, I spoke to Tuomas and he gave me permission to let go, he felt the group was strong enough to hold that space (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

After the workshop I felt I wouldn't be able to mind myself if I had gone too deep I'd done enough that day (Kerry Interview Ic April 2019)

### Healing

Thanks so much for making the weekend so special. I am now percolating the thoughts feelings images and now newly to me, voice and sound of the three days (Karen WA3 April 2019)

Normally I would have probably been upset by a remark like that, but that is because of my conditioned ideas on grief. How I am experiencing grief this time is different so I just thought wow, yes I am. Through my grieving process I have talked freely with my family and met many wonderful people through my Lamenting experience and we are sharing our grief stories openly, talking about death and dying (Mary WA1 May 2019).

I don't think that I understood what balance was until very very recently literally since the lament I have had this grounded feeling [...] it was almost like a cellular thing, more landed into the ground. There's a physicality to it (Joan Interview Ia April 2019)

I was thinking in the car, after the attack I covered the wound, stuffed it with dressings and put a plaster over it. Lamenting on the trauma, I have taken the plaster off, and the stuffing out, cleaned the wound and am healing from inside out, if the wound was as deep as a thumb, I am about half

way up the healing process. So lamenting on healing now instead of the incident (Mary WA1 May 2019).

Lamenting has really helped unpick the plaster that I had stuck over the wound. Pulled out the dressing that I stuffed in over the years, (in the beginning it was too early to process it.) The lamenting weekend allowed me to state what happened to me, without feeling over dramatic (it was) without being fixed, facilitated or made better by anyone else. It enabled me to look with clarity, with the support of my wonderful group, witnessing me in all my, shock, (yes shock even after 8 years) my tears, my anger my vulnerability and fear. (Mary WA1 May 2019).

A piece of me left that day, in 1982. My young 5 year old mind summarised the story around the hurt I felt in that loss. The Lament weekend opened the space for that piece of me to return (Sorcha WA1 24 May 2019).

I have found considerable release in my trauma, this process is continuing but I feel it is ultimately life changing (Mary SM1 May 2019)

It was like a calling back to a part of me that was split of through suffering (Joan Interview Ia April 2019)

I felt it has pulled me back into my body, I don't think I'm fully balanced yet but much more whole again and not so displaced by the (traumatic) event (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

I'm healing on behalf of a collective not just my own healing (Joan Interview Ia April 2019)

## Belonging to a collective

The weekend we all shared changed me more than anything I've done (Gina WA4 May 2019).

For the first time I Belong (Gina WA4 May 2019).

I think our group journey was about showing up, being open, honest, and that created a belonging that was truly authentic and in the moment (Mary WA1 May 2019).

It was different to other workshops because we didn't talk about ourselves, it was about the work, often in other workshops there is surface level chatter, it's like we did away with that and stripped it back to meaning and true connection (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

I do sense though that there is a longing in me to openly grieve in front of people I've done it in a dance workshop which was two hours why moving dancing that was massive for me I feel there is deeper work to do in that area I'd like space to go slowly and space held for me so that if things came up I would be in the right place I really do feel that crying has been easier it's amazing to be able to cry (Kerry Interview Ic April 2019)

'Honestly surprised that I got so much from it, I am a person that finds it hard to be open about my feelings in a large group, and suppose felt what good does it do (Deirdre, SM8 April 2018).

I've never been to a workshop where the safety and unity so quickly formed (Deirdre, SM8 April 2018).

## Release of Grief/Letting go

I believe the Keening experience I had with A Time to Gather helped me immensely to lean into the grief and experience my grief through the physical journey of lament. The release on the body, was immense after my personal lament. I slept well, I walked more easily with less muscle aches, and we all looked visibly younger after our big release through Keening. It was a huge part of my ongoing healing journey after the death of my mum (Mary WA1, July 2019)

People had releases in and healings in duality. Could feel my lament released something for XX next to me and I'm glad something was releasing for her as well (Mary WA1, July 2019).

It helped to articulate some of the feelings I had, as well as allowing me to tap in and release some sorrow (Caoimhe SM7 April 2018).

By allowing my grief to expand and mingle with the grief and support of others it felt like something massive had been released and it was good to acknowledge the magnitude of it, something I had diminished or contracted and it was a big relief. Its like it was bigger but less scary than I had imagined. I also liked how it was communal rather than solitary (Caoimhe SM7 April 2018)

But this experience was different we all need to grieve and being able to express that grief in a safe space left me feeling really good and wanting to do more of the same (Deirdre, SM8 April 2018).

My lament focused on my father, and his death and the fact that so much was left unsaid before he died. I was deeply effected by this as I had not prepared this lament, it just came out when I started. I am aware of how I wanted my relationship with my father to be different, so I was angry , sad, and upset, but I realise now that I cannot change anything about that relationship just accept that he is gone and we both did our best. It is something that will always be with me but I felt I let go of the angry on the day and that was great, (Michael SM9 April 2018)

It was lovely for me to be with my sense of loss without wanting to change or fix (Michael SM9 April 2018)

I found that through some of their exercises and peoples own expressions of loss it was brilliant for me, the tears were falling in a lot of the exercises and it was a lovely release [...]. Being supported by other peoples loss enables a lot (Caoimhe SM7 April 2018)

Appreciation, tenderness, sadness, joy, compassion and memories of loved ones passed. (Caoimhe SM7 April 2018)

That it had been interesting and a little unsettling, and quite emotional, taking that space and time, to explore emotional, spiritual, and personal issues within a group, most of whom I did not already know, and it would be of interest to do that, or something similar, at another time (SR 6 April 2018).

## Witnessing

This is what I noticed on my Keening workshop that someone else's words can help you release. We can feel so alone, but when we share about grief, share our stories we realise we are never alone (Mary WA April 2019)

By unpacking and decompressing the grief, having it articulated and witnessed, it became at once more expansive, deeper, more intimate and more universal than I had imagined. I'm finding it hard to express this. (Caoimhe SM7 April 2018)

I've never underestimated the power of that, most of my healing has been in groups (Caoimhe SM7 April 2018).

Other people's words help you to release (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

Any time I have wanted to share with friends or partner I felt it was self-indulgent and asking for comfort and reassurance. What was comforting was that people had heard my experiences, witnessed by others... no longer my own private horror story...validated me (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

People felt their crying needed to be witnessed (Helen Interview Id June 2019)

Outrageous, courageous audacity to be self. People want to be met without shame or judgement (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

I felt touched and connect with individuals in the group. I noticed that this feeling was stronger toward those who had shared their vulnerabilities less so toward those who seemed to stay away. Overall I felt a deep connection which was heart warming (Michael SM9 April 2018).

Everyone saw each other being so authentic in a creative way  
Felt I was being 'seen' and being seen is a huge part of the healing. Group facilitates a level of healing that can't be done on a one to one level (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

These new lament friends, that is on a different scale to anything (Joan Interview Ia April 2019).

After the workshop I began crying more and more frequently [...]it's opened up a well and I find it much easier to cry in front of people when I'm deeply moved (Kerry Interview Ic April 2019)

## Spiritual references

It's so beautiful that the lament seems to be working at a higher consciousness level. With our personal release energetically we release the symbiotic metaphysical cords that we have kept holding that relationship in that space. When we release, we change the space between us perhaps... (Mary WA1 May 2019)

Since the keening I've realized how important it is to learn to trust my relationship to spirit [...] 'source' (Joan Interview Ia April 2019)

It was Transformational magic (Mary WA1 May 2019)

In ritual you are creating space for 'source' to do its work, it is beyond understanding a lot of the time (Joan Interview Ia April 2019)

I can't even remember much of Saturday because it seemed to go into a spiritual space of its own [...] it was so powerful, there was so much work to be done for everyone who was there (Joan Interview Ia April 2019 )

## Ancestors

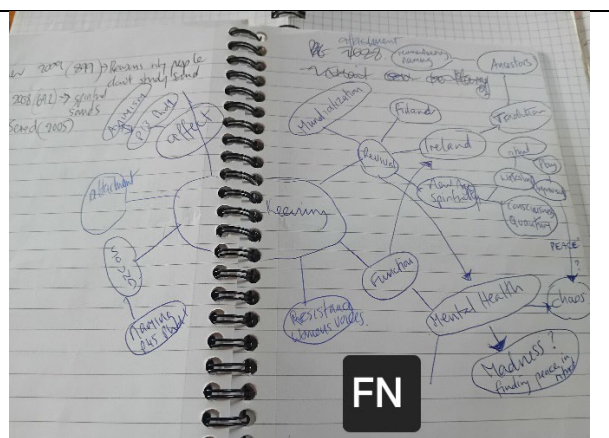
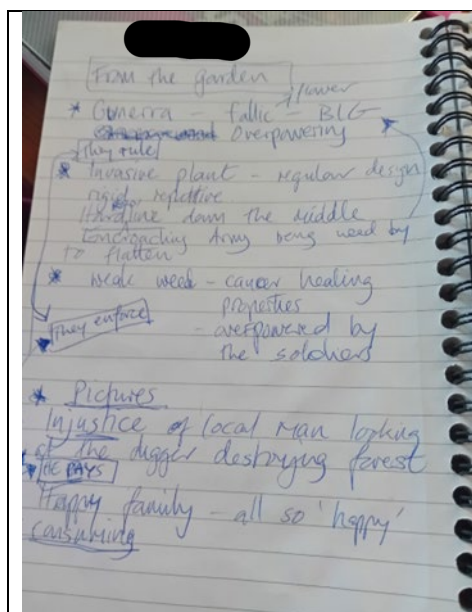
In that lament I did in our workshop was a calling back through the ancestral line to heal the disconnect that my current family is holding (Joan Interview Ia April 2019 )

## Trauma

We are all traumatized. How could a sense of belonging not be an issue? (Joan interview 1a)

I think the trauma that I was carrying wasn't even of my own are of this lifetime so it's part of my lineage my ancestral storyline almost as if my journey is this incarnation [...] it's the calling back the restoring of the shame disconnect that my people have experienced overtime (Joan Interview Ia April 2019)

## Appendix G—Samples from Fieldnotes/ Emerging Themes



5/19. Jeff Foster  
Healing happens when you get out of the way. LONG PIECE SAVED ON DRIVE

13/5/19.  
(In response to [redacted] singing to her daughter to wish she would grieve her losses. Lamenting is a way of connecting even if they are not there. I sang to the sea today and ended up singing to my mum even though she has passed & felt the connection — to dead rather

14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> May.  
Discussion about how 'singing' and lament to family members seem to have changed things in people's relationships for the better. Had these conversations to 'Drive' [redacted] every weekend

(Social Services) :  
trying to take my nature  
away from me

Help came from the Universe  
Tanya is like the Universe

both sad and things that moved  
me to happiness. Quite quickly  
that began to happen.

5:50 Don't know if that was because  
it was ok to do so after  
hearing you and facilitator about  
lamenting - it's opened up a well  
and find it much easier to cry  
in front of people & when I'm  
deeply moved

6:20 I still hold myself back I suppose  
from having a fully good cry  
but I put it back

6:30 I do sense though that there

I would have a few of going to those  
places, but that was the reason  
I was coming @

4:14 Afterwards I cried and I was  
trying to explore what I was so upset  
and I think, I said this to you after  
wards - I was just a bit concerned  
about what it was that.....

Concern  
felt, this is not keeping as I  
understand it although it has some  
aspects of it, and is inspired by  
4:48 it. And how is the practice

Discussing 'Longing to Belong' Book

1:10 We turn to addiction when we don't feel a belonging.

Deep Loss needed to belong almost a rite of passage of deep loss in order to come to a full sense of real belonging.

1:41 You do need to almost go on a quest of sorts which can be unconscious that resonates with me because same part of me knew that I needed to withdraw from society/work/friends/family in order to question all of the conditioning that I felt had been laid upon me.

2:19 Shoulds & shouldnts that weren't really my own that we either inherited or learned, she talks about that in the book & lady.

2:40 In order to question you need to withdraw.

disconnected that any people have experienced over time. I came into 9:10 this form - spirit manifesting me. I chose this as a quest, I would take that up as a purpose that is what my belonging is.

9:29 I'm healing on the behalf of a collective, not just my own healing.

the it imagining for me is that  
 we are almost reversing the process  
 and calling in healing  
 I called part of my family's <sup>language</sup>  
 3:15 Soul back into  
 Irish people's spirit was broken  
 alcohol, introduced  
 pride taken away, pushed into  
 3:40 a particular type of behaviour  
 which was about survival  
 Addiction was a way for us to numb  
 ourselves

3:40 Remember feeling shame about  
 not understanding the Irish  
 language, filled <sup>me</sup> with anxiety really  
 because I know there were  
 many native speakers there. So  
 while it filled me with shame  
 4:04 there was also a deep grief, <sup>remembering</sup> learning  
 it in school & not continuing <sup>with</sup> it  
 I was very moved when the Irish lament  
 was played and feeling a deep  
 connection in that **CONNECTION**  
 4:30 Remember not <sup>being able</sup> taking part in the  
 second half of the workshop.  
 was physically sick at the time  
 and to go any deeper would have been  
 overwhelming for me. I felt I wasn't  
 ready to continue & wanted to do in  
 future but had done enough on  
 4:59 that day **FEAR/OUT OF CONTROL**  
 Remember the kindness of the  
 facilitator and how gentle he was  
 & understanding I couldn't continue  
 5:15 It felt like a safe space

underestimated the power of that  
most of my healing has been in  
36:11 groups. Everyone got a huge  
amount of seeing others being  
so authentic in a creative  
way that didn't get bogged down

36:36 in story

Being seen is a huge part of  
the healing. Group facilitates  
a level of healing that can't be  
done on a one to one level

8:20 talk much about our lives, we talked  
about our griefs & struggles. Even in  
the down times we didn't ask  
'what do you do?' etc

8:38 [Mainly it was about the work  
that was different to other workshops  
often in other workshops theres surface  
level chatter - it's like we did  
away with that and stopped it  
back to meaning and true  
connection

a voice, language and why  
powerful for you.

10:38 I think there was a nervousness  
about our personal laments.

On the day or the night before  
I thought, actually ..... I talked  
to Thomas about lamenting on my  
traumatic experience, he said he  
could hold that space for me and  
he felt the group was strong enough  
to hold that space. He gave me  
permission really to do that. I had  
done a lot of grieving for my mum.

(109)

4:12 it was self indulgent and asking  
for comfort & reassurance. What  
was comforting & reassuring was that  
people heard my experience & it  
wasn't something that was playing out

4:43 in subconscious & out of my body  
no longer my private horror story

it had been witnessed by others &  
validated me in that process.

~~2018~~ [redacted] Weekend April 2018  
Storm  
Smoke ceremony  
Communal eating  
Strangers → bringing together  
Sharing rooms  
Hearing stories, difficult stories  
hard for people to let go but  
for some it was easy & tears came  
About:  
Hurt child  
Invisible child  
Shame  
Want to be free  
Anger at mad neighbour suing them  
Child died & etc  
Homesick  
Mother died / heartbreak  
Can't connect with children  
Childhood abuse / parent not present  
Lots of healing already done  
work  
[redacted] Books?  
She mentions that saved  
her life

2.18 Because it was much more focused  
on the Irish tradition than the Finnish  
so this has to happen, to learn  
to figure out what it can be  
what Keeney can be in a  
contemporary context, experiment  
has to happen. Part

I do feel I could do with another workshop and longer than 2 hours  
 space to go slowly + space held for me. So if things came up I would be in the right place.  
 Yeah I feel that in that small few hours, I really do feel that crying has been easier.  
 Thank you its amazing to be able to cry.

First attempt at themes and colour key for reading notes

How can a certain contemporary or historical terminological/theoretical approach to phenomenon of sound culture contribute to this phenomenon?

③ Sonic Artifacts

- Affect
- Vibration, group think
- Truth? Being, honesty simplicity, purity?
- Blue Lament ~~pp. 6~~ p. 25/26/27 limits
- gaps. p. 25/26-28.
- Sound in history p. 14-21
- representation Recording 18-23

## First attempt at colour key for themes in readings

|                |                                                          |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
|                | Affect                                                   |
|                | Group think/vibration<br>trance                          |
|                | Health, Mental<br>Health, Therapy                        |
|                | honesty, purity,<br>without meaning<br>simplicity, truth |
| Blue           | Lament p.6                                               |
| ?              | Sound in history<br>(in texts) p.4-21                    |
| Representation | p.6                                                      |
| Sandwalks      |                                                          |
| Sound Mapping  |                                                          |
| Recordings     | 18-23                                                    |

## Trying out Initial theme colour key

Changes the nature of Memory, time  
place, vibrates the live element

Sound recording quickly accepted as a way  
to preserve ~~past~~ sonic/vocal performances  
of the past & keep in archives for future  
generations

Literary representation (Gitterman 1999)  
Lament & literary

\* find the violin piece  
which Claudia did for me.

Trying out Initial theme colour  
key

RN

45/ Music is central to the  
memory of emotional qualities  
of a living tradition.  
Ethnomusicologist often too concerned  
with structure & symbolic images  
when it is emotional communication  
through sounding is essential  
to the understanding of environment  
& feeling' merging personal, social  
& Moral.

91 Lament in Helsinki Jan 2017

- Prompted by a re-visiting of 2013 Death of Kari Irish Lament paper for ISSE 2016 conference.
- Remembered there was a revival effort in Helsinki and checked out the workshop & Made enquiries with the organizer Pirkko Fihlman about cost of workshops etc.
- She responded by offering me accommodation and a private FOC workshop at her home where she will invite English speaking Lament Workers.
- ALSO Jim Wilce happened to be there in January also! So I will get a chance to meet him.
- Been speaking to a lot of people about it and many interested.

CONNECTIONS

- Sharon Women in London
- Cait Brannigan - Workshops in Ireland
- Woman in Glen of Aherlow recently heard Keating - Trish McGrath
- Joe Creedon Inchegeela - modern form of Lament

SWANER SCHOOL?

Sensory ethnography Labs

\* Ask the DH question \*

- Representation - how do we represent?
- How do we find the historical sound?

Senses of Vibration | Reason  
Is there.  
Soundscape of Irish funerals?  
Heath

Pukka Pad  
RN  
(20)  
at the moment of utterance  
honest, pure  
without being committed to  
words - to the literal  
x therefore muddled (better word?)  
This is why the process of  
anthrop' ethnography' and  
attempting to understand the  
effect of oral utterance in  
lament is so importance.  
I need to know what the  
effect on the person is  
AT THAT MOMENT OF  
UTTERANCE  
what ideas, feelings, its sparks

