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**“I’m gonna be free”: Listening to expressions of queer
identity and cultural Catholicism in the music of
contemporary Irish artists**

Thesis presented by

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Master by Research

University College Cork

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January 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.

Digital signature of the candidate: Laura Fleming

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late dad, Michael Fleming. For giving me my love of music, and for passing on an endless thirst for knowledge. I am so proud to be your daughter.

Acknowledgements

I would not have been able to complete this thesis without the support of the people I am so lucky to be surrounded with. I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Dr. Melanie Marshall and Dr. Emily Gale for their continued patience and encouragement over the last two years. I am so grateful for your insights, words of understanding and support, and for giving me the inspiration to begin this journey.

To my mum, Ann, (who will probably be even happier than me that I've finally finished this), for raising me to be as strong and resilient as she is, and for giving me the tough love I needed (especially when I didn't know I needed it).

To my siblings, my best friends, for always being there to offer support and for cheering me on until the end, I would be entirely lost without each of you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On the 3rd of October 1992, Shuhada' Sadaqat, professionally (and more commonly) known as Sinéad O'Connor, performed an *a cappella* version of Bob Marley's "War" on the popular American television show, Saturday Night Live. In her version, she modified the lyrics of the song's sixth verse to directly reference child abuse:

Table 1

Side by side: Bob Marley's "War" (left), and the version performed by Sinead O'Connor on SNL in 1992 (right).

And until the ignoble and unhappy regime	Until the ignoble and unhappy regime
That hold our brothers in Angola	which holds all of us through
In Mozambique	Child abuse, yeah
South Africa	Child abuse, yeah
Sub-human bondage	Sub-human bondage
Have been toppled	Have been toppled
Utterly destroyed	Utterly destroyed.
(Marley 01:50-02:15)	(O'Connor "Fight the REAL Enemy" 01:.40-02:03)

As she sang the songs' final line; "we have confidence in the victory of good over evil" she held up a picture of Pope John Paul II, which she had taken from her mother's house (O'Connor *Rememberings* 175), and ripped it up before proclaiming; 'Fight the real enemy' (02:49-03:08). It remains one of the most iconic moments in Irish music to this day.

Unsurprisingly, the reaction was primarily negative. In the days following her performance, SNL received over 4,000 calls criticising her, and she was given a lifetime ban from the show (Greene). Thirteen days later she was booed off the stage at Madison Square Garden

(Mayhew 175). In her 2002 biography, *Rememberings*, she wrote about her feelings towards the incident:

A lot of people say or think that tearing up the Pope's photo derailed my career. That's not how I feel about it. I feel that having a number-one record derailed my career and my tearing the photo put me back on the right track. I had to make my living performing live again. And that's what I was born for. I wasn't born to be a pop star (179).

O'Connor had a complex relationship with religion, which she was very open about. She was born in Dublin in 1966, was raised in a Catholic home, and attended one of the oldest Catholic girls' secondary schools in Ireland (Gilmore). Her 2002 biography, *Rememberings* details much of the presence of religion in her early life; family trips to Lourdes, finding comfort in God and Jesus when suffering abuse at the hands of her mother, and fear of receiving the "calling" to become a nun (she felt that it would be depressing) (17-29). As a teenager, she spent eighteen months in "Grianán", a Magdalene Laundry, where one of the nuns bought her first guitar, and found her a teacher (62). In 1999 she was ordained a priest for the Irish Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic church, an independent branch of Catholicism, although her ordination was not recognised by the mainstream Catholic church (BBC News). She was vocal in her condemnation of the institution of the Catholic church, through her music but also in her life as an activist. In 2010, writing for the *Independent*, she called for the Vatican to be destroyed, labelling it "a nest of devils" (O'Connor "destroy nest of devils"). In 2018, she renounced Catholicism and reverted to Islam, describing it as "the natural conclusion of any intelligent theologian's journey" (Lonergan). Her tumultuous relationship with religion and particularly with the Catholic church is representative of many Irish people's struggle to reconcile their personal faith and spirituality with the institution of the Catholic church.

I was introduced to the music of Sinead O'Connor in the same way as much of the music I listen to, through my parents. Like many other Irish people of my generation, her albums were a staple in my family car. I recall the striking bald-headed image on the cover of *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*, and she was at least some of the inspiration behind my desire to shave my own head. Both her androgynous appearance and her unique voice appealed to me from early on; she was so different from any other female artist I had encountered, and on top of it, she was Irish. She was *ours*. Something I was unaware of until much later however, was O'Connor's queer identity. In a 2000 interview, she called herself a lesbian, although she later retracted the statement, calling herself "three-quarters heterosexual, a quarter gay" (qtd. In Iftikhar). Later, she clarified further, stating that her prospective partner "could be green, white and orange, they could be whatever the opposite of gay or straight is. If [she fell] in love with someone, [she] wouldn't give a sh*t if they were a man or a woman" (qtd. In Iftikhar). Regardless of her personal identity, she was a fierce supporter of the LGBTQ+ community. In 1988 she performed at London Pride, just one month after Margaret Thatcher passed Section 28, which prohibited the promotion of homosexuality, forcing the closure of many LGBT groups at the time. In 1990, she wore a Dublin AIDS Alliance t-shirt on *The Late Late Show*, a bold statement at a time when HIV was highly stigmatised and exclusively associated with male homosexuality, which was still illegal under Irish law. More recently, in 2017, she donated her wardrobe to the Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI), in order for it to be given to trans people in need (Iftikhar). Whether or not she personally identified as queer, her respect and love for the LGBTQ+ community, coupled with her status as an outsider in Irish society marked her as a queer icon for many.

I have chosen to begin this research project with O'Connor because she lies at the intersection of everything that this thesis will discuss queer identity, Irish cultural

Catholicism, spirituality, and music. Although she will not be examined as one of my case studies for reasons detailed below, she informs much of the context of this project, which is the culmination of my research into the relationship between Irish cultural Catholicism and queer Irish identity as revealed and complicated through music. For many, queer identity and Irish identity are polarised, situated at a point of tension as a result of the homophobic teachings of the Catholic church, an institution which has historically held immense power in Ireland. I will explore this contentious relationship, drawing from personal experience as well as those of other queer Irish people to examine what it means to be a queer person in Ireland today. With this as the contextual background for my case studies, I will examine the use of religious images, language and symbols by contemporary Irish queer musicians. Finally, I will explore the impact of this for queer listeners, and the participation of these musicians in the imagining of a queer Irish utopia through music.

Defining ‘queer Irish musicians’

In setting the boundaries of this thesis, I feel it important to give context to the language I choose to use here, as well as my reasoning for doing so. ‘Queer’ presents the first semantic issue I come up against given that I choose to use the term in much of the discourse here, for reasons that are both personal and academic. I follow the language used by many of the queer theorists who have both inspired and informed this work, and the acceptance and usage of the term ‘queer’ in academic settings. Moreover, I have chosen this term for its scope in terms of definition. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who in the early 1990s, when the term was just beginning to come into use in academia (and was met with some controversy), highlighted the multidimensional significance of the word:

(..) one of the things that “queer” can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps...and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically (7).

In the thirty or so years that have passed since she wrote these words, this interpretation of ‘queer’ is still relevant; many individuals consider it an umbrella term for a multitude of identities. Since this thesis draws from the experiences of people whose identities and experiences vary quite widely, it seems logical to use a single term that is representative of a potentially infinite number of identities.

Still the term has its limitations, as all language inevitably does. The label is not for everyone; it is a word that is for many is “fraught with so many social and personal histories of exclusion [and] violence” (Sedgwick 8), and as such some prefer not to use it. However, as Butler points out, the word itself is performative; it has evolved, acquired new meanings through repetition and usage, although it’s important to note that this does not, in Butler’s view, nullify its history. Sara Ahmed offers a useful summary of this:

As a sticky sign, ‘queer’ acquires new meanings not by being cut off from its previous contexts of utterance, but by preserving them. In queer politics, the force of insult is retained; ‘the not’ is not negated (‘we are positive’), but embraced, and is taken on as a name (166)

Hence, its use here aims not to disregard the history of the label, but follow the path created by these academics wherein the reclamation of queer “depends on collective activism... In other words, it takes more than one body to open up semantic as well as political possibilities” (Ahmed 166). This project is therefore an engagement with this collective, in order to continue to broaden the potential of the term to encompass both personal and communal experiences.

Secondly, I wish to define ‘Irish’ in the context of this project. I have decided to focus specifically on the Republic of Ireland in this study, rather than the island as a unit. The reason for this is simply because the Island of Ireland has a political and social landscape that is too broad for the scope of this thesis. Much of the first chapter (and this thesis in general) focuses on defining queer Irish experience in relation to Irish cultural Catholicism. There are many similarities between the experiences of queer people in Northern Ireland as in the Republic, as Fintan Walsh reminds us, “homophobia is rampant in Northern Ireland, and it is ably encouraged by a culture of sectarianism and religious fundamentalism” (46). However, the specific social and cultural (and religious) landscape of the north varies from that of the Republic in many ways. As such, an effort to involve the entire island of Ireland may be influenced (and indeed, hindered) by my own experience of growing up in the Republic, and I fear would not do justice to the complexity of the history and context necessary for this type of discussion.

Finally, I will define the focus group of this study, referred to as queer Irish musicians. The phrase is relatively self-explanatory, describing members of the queer community in Ireland who make music. Ireland has long had a thriving music scene, particularly in its major cities, and the overlap in Irish music spaces with Irish queer spaces is not insignificant. However, for the purpose of this thesis I am focusing primarily on musicians who address either queer themes or Irish-Catholic themes directly in their music (or in an ideal situation, both). As such, Irish band Pillow Queens became my primary case study due to the prominence of these concepts in their music, while singer-songwriter Orla Gartland is my secondary case study, as queerness and Catholicism do appear in her music, although to a lesser degree. It is also worth noting here that all of the musicians dealt with in this study identify as women. I deliberated over including the term ‘female’ in this definition, or a perhaps more inclusive term such as ‘woman-identifying’ or even ‘women-aligned’, but

in the end it felt more exclusive than inclusive. This is not to diminish the significant role of gender in much of what will be discussed (and which I will refer to at times), but rather to maintain an openness in this discussion towards including queer Irish musicians of all genders.

Another important factor to note here is the time frame in which I am operating. While undoubtedly queer Irish musicians have been active in Ireland far before my case studies, I decided to focus on a time that felt most relevant to me: the present day. While the second chapter deals with tracing history and its impact on Irish queer identity, I find that I am attempting to quantify a specific point in time, particularly in noting the rapid change in Ireland in recent years, and the impact of this on music being made now. However, given the recent historical context that is so fundamental to this project, it felt incorrect not to talk about queer musicians that were active in Ireland prior to now, and which also gave rise to the music of my case studies. As such, Sinéad O'Connor has become the branch between past and present here. Although she is a prominent figure in this work, she did not appear in my earlier drafts beyond a brief mention or two. However, as the project progressed, it became quite clear that it would be impossible to complete without her. I have noted above that O'Connor does not strictly fit into the definition of the case studies. While she is queer and many Catholic themes appear in her music, what's lacking is the intersection of queerness and Irish cultural Catholic influence. This coupled with the time frame in which she was primarily making music, I felt it more appropriate to include her as a contextual figure in this thesis, rather than as one of my case studies. Nevertheless, she reappears throughout this project and informs much of my argument. As she blazed the trail for many (queer) Irish outcasts, she creates the path for this thesis.

Background on (Irish) popular music and religion

Sinead O'Connor is not the only Irish musician to tackle religion through musical performance. U2 have been read as a “semi-secretly Christian rock band”; much of their music deals thematically with the band members’ own faith and search for meaning, as well as songs that heavily reference scriptures (Nast). The Cranberries have also tackled religious issues in their music, most famously in “Zombie”, a protest song against the violence of The Troubles, the video for which contains overtly religious symbols. A more recent, and perhaps more critical example is Hozier’s “Take Me to Church”. The singer's breakthrough hit, released in 2015 is a biting criticism of the hypocrisy of the church, most notably in the lines “I’ll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies / I’ll tell you my sins so you can sharpen your knife” (0.58-1.05). The song also draws a comparison between a lover and religion, and the video for which details the homophobic abuse faced by two men in a same-sex relationship. Speaking of the track, Hozier said:

“Take Me to Church” was first a series of lyrical ideas where I was reflecting quite a bit on the legacy of the institutional lies of the Roman Catholic Church at home in Ireland. How it had treated people, the soft power that it had held over people’s lives for so long. Here was this institution that had managed to instil in society this matrix of thought and values, which was deeply hypocritical and incredibly damaging (Beresford).

While much of the music relating to Catholicism coming out of Ireland could be considered protest music, the use of religious imagery in music more broadly is unsurprisingly not exclusive to the Irish music scene. A study conducted by McKee and Pardun in 1995 found that 38.13% of music videos shown on MTV at that time contained religious imagery (44). A similar study from 2008 (published 2012) found that 30% of music videos examined contained religious images (Morgan et. al 438). This is not exactly revelational; religion has appeared time and time again in popular music, with artists from

Madonna to Kanye West using Christian visual and lyrical references in their music to different effects.

Such practices are also not exclusive to popular music; in the alternative music sphere, heavy metal music has a long history of preoccupation with religious iconography as explored by Jason C. Bivins in the fifth chapter of *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (100-118). Similarly, Pardun and McKee have argued that "rock groups have increasingly embraced religious imagery and symbols in a seemingly ironic attempt to identify themselves, to defy convention, and perhaps to shock traditionalists by placing what have been regarded as sacred symbols into an overwhelmingly secular arena" (438). The associated idea of 'satanic panic' has reemerged, mostly in connection to queer musicians using religious symbols in admittedly quite inflammatory ways (Lil Nas X's video for "MONTERO (Call Me by Your Name)" for example, which features the singer pole dancing into hell, and twerking on the devil). Common is the use of eroticism and the body to undermine or challenge religious powers that be. As McClary notes, "subversion of authority and seduction by means of the body recur as constants throughout music history" (*Reading Music* 30). Others, however, believe that religion can appear in music without consequence. Gilmour (somewhat boldly) asserts that "more times than not the biblical language heard in pop songs is relatively inconsequential, and often not even deliberate" (67). This raises a number of questions; does the use of religious or biblical language have to be deliberate in order to be consequential? How do we define this consequentiality given that music can be interpreted any number of ways, and its consequences for one listener may be different to another? Who is given the authority to decide when religious language is consequential? Perhaps I am, as Gilmour suggests, guilty of "overstat[ing] the profundity of music" (67), or perhaps the appearance of religious or biblical language in popular music is *always* significant, given that it is part of a dialogue between two major facets of modern culture.

Still, attempting to answer these questions pertaining to the world and popular music in general may be somewhat ambitious for the scope of this thesis. As such, I argue that at least in an Irish context, given the impact of religion on our collective identity, use of religious imagery, language and symbolism is consistently consequential, particularly when those musicians making use of it are queer.

Methods

As a research project situated in the realm of ethnomusicology, many of the research methods employed here are rooted in ethnographic practices. I borrow from Jodie Taylor who in turn borrows from Halberstem to employ a “scavenger methodology”, in Halberstam’s words, a methodology “that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour” (13). In this research project, a scavenger methodology means I combine a number of ethnographic methods, including thick description, autoethnography, textual analysis, close reading of songs and music videos, and ethnographic research interviews.

The first method employed is an attempt at Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” as outlined in his 1978 work, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. This method is largely employed in the second chapter, which sets the context for my case studies, and hence, my argument, and involves the ethnographic act of writing as much detail as possible (within a reasonable scope for this work) about the culture one is examining. In this case, the culture is that of queer Irish musicians, and Irish queer people more generally. I use thick description so as to keep all interpretations of music and performance grounded in the experiences of those who this project is based on. Similarly, employing autoethnography allows me to incorporate personal experience, again keeping this project based in real life experience. Autoethnography incorporates “three characteristics or activities: the “auto,” or self; the “ethno,” or culture;

and the “graphy,” or representation/writing/story” (Adams et. al 3). Due to my insider status as a queer Irish person, I find it useful to incorporate autoethnographic methods, to link my personal experience with wider cultural and social phenomenon.

Continuing the trend of prioritising life experience to build this project, data gathered through anonymised online interviews with seven participants informs much of my observations around identity, primarily in the second chapter, which focuses on defining queer Irish identity, and in the fourth chapter, which examines the role of music in constructing identity. After obtaining ethical approval from the university ethics board, I put out a call for participants. The only requirement for participation was that they were members of the LGBTQ+ community who were Irish, or who had lived in Ireland for a significant portion of their life. An interest or knowledge of the Irish music scene was listed as a plus, but not a requirement. All interviews were conducted online, recorded and transcribed at a later date, and the quotes used throughout this work have been anonymised to protect the identities of participants. While a relatively small sample size, feedback from participants allowed me to delve further into personal narratives of queer Irish people, and their experiences with cultural Catholicism, and how this has impacted their relationship with their queerness, and with music. I also conducted a personal interview with Pamela Connolly, the lead singer of Pillow Queens (this work’s primary case study). Similarly, this was carried out online and transcribed later, however her standing as a public figure, she consented to be credited in this work and provided valuable insight into the impact of Irish Catholicism on her music making. In all cases, I have edited quotes to remove filler words or unnecessary repetition to minimise disruption for the reader, and where needed, added additional words for ease of understanding.

The final method in my scavenger process is the use of a range of journalistic sources, as well as content from websites such as Twitter and Youtube. These sources allow me to

access interviews with my case studies in which they discuss topics relevant to this thesis, as well as critical reception and fan opinions of my case studies. By using these sources, I broaden the scope of this project, and obtain more lived experiences of queer Irish people with the music I am exploring here.

Theories

This project is heavily influenced by ongoing discourse in the study of religion and popular culture, a discipline which has gained significant traction in recent years. In the early 19th century, Durkheim's sacred-profane dichotomy provided a framework for understanding the role of religion in society, where the sacred refers to things, symbols, rituals, or places that are regarded as extraordinary or significant, and the profane encompasses the mundane, ordinary aspects of everyday life (Fields xliiix-xlix). However, with the cultural turn of the late 1900s came a movement towards interpretation of cultures as a web of symbols, wherein none is distinct from the other (Geertz 5). Moreover, later sociologists have suggested the distinctions between the sacred and the profane have weakened, or even collapsed. In light of these developments within the field, the relationship between popular culture and religion has become increasingly understood as a complex and multi-faceted interaction between two elements of society. Forbes recognises "at least" four ways in which religion and popular culture can interact, namely (i) Religion in popular culture; (ii) popular culture in religion; (iii) popular culture as religion and (iv) religion and popular culture in dialogue (11). For the purpose of this thesis, I am interested only in (i), (iii) and (iv), since I am not analysing the "appropriation of popular culture by religious institutions" (17).

Another useful framework for examining the relationship between religion and popular culture comes from Conrad Ostwalt's *Secular Steeples*. He follows Geertz's web analogy, arguing that religion is "one strand among many cultural strands that are interrelated

in human society”, and furthermore that it is “necessarily entangled with secular culture” (23). In an Irish context this is particularly noteworthy; as outlined in the previous chapter, religion remains a significant influence on Irish culture and identity. Irish popular culture then becomes a space in which this identity is expressed, explored, and often, challenged. Furthermore, Ostwalt sees secularisation as a bidirectional process in which “not only do we see religious institutions becoming more like the secular world, but we also see secular forms of entertainment and culture carrying religious messages” (31). When considered with the ongoing secularisation of Ireland, it is then unsurprising that religion is appearing more and more in products of popular culture; in film, in television, in performance, and as is relevant here, in music. It is also important to note the bidirectionality of this interaction that Ostwalt highlights, both in the context of secularisation as well as in the relationship between religion and popular culture more broadly. As Forbes notes, “popular culture both reflects us and shapes us, and the implications of that twofold dynamic are profound” (5). In relation to Irish popular music then, the influence of Catholic cultural identity is not only reflected but also produced; the effect of which is seen both in music and its performance, as well as in those who partake in it.

Other important theoretical approaches come primarily from queer and feminist musicologists, who have formed the basis for thinking about the role that music plays in the construction of queer identity, to create community, kinship and belonging, not only with other queer listeners, but also with queer music makers. Specifically, I draw from Cusick’s queer listening practices as outlined in “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music” to argue that queer Irish listeners engage with music differently to their heterosexual counterparts, finding more meaning and identification with queer musicians who articulate relatable experiences. Finally, I draw from discourses on the concept of queer utopias, particularly Jose Estaban Muñoz’s work on queer futurity and his “rejection of the here and now and an insistence on

potentiality or concrete possibility for another world”, as well as his argument that queer aesthetic “frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity”(1). Similarly, in an Irish context Fintan Walsh explores how Irish queer performance “articulates experience of oppression, exclusion and displacement, while imagining and cultivating more accommodating, inclusive, and sustaining modes of interpersonal intimacy, social support, public participation and cultural belonging” (1). Using this as a theoretical framework, I argue that queer Irish musicians participate in the musical imagining of a queer Irish utopia, through the occupation of a space traditionally held by Catholicism.

Situating myself

Given that this project is heavily inspired by my own lived experiences, I feel it is important to contextualise my own position in writing this thesis. Moreover, I want to acknowledge my position as both an insider and an outsider in this discussion. The idea of insider/outsider status has been gaining popularity in the realm of musicology since its conception by Bruno Nettl in 1983, however more recent approaches have begun to destabilise this dichotomy, considering the possibility to occupy both insider and outsider positions simultaneously, rather than regarding them as mutually exclusive states within an oppositional binary. As Zhao notes, “interacting in the field with people of different ethnic, professional or socioeconomic characteristics dynamises a researcher's insider/outsider position and brings his or her in-between position to the fore” (185). It is from this in-between position that I have conducted this research; I have insider status as a queer Irish person, however given the range of identities, ethnicities, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds within the Irish queer community, it would be disingenuous to claim total ‘insider’ status in this field. As such, I feel it useful to provide a short biography in order to

contextualise my own position in this thesis for the reader. I do this firstly because I utilise an autoethnographic approach and refer to my own experience as a point of analysis in this project. However, I also wish to acknowledge the limitations of my position, and to highlight (both to myself and the reader) my subjectivity in this project.

I was born in 1997 and grew up in a relatively small town in the Republic of Ireland. My parents were not devout Catholics by any means, although my siblings and I were all baptised, made our communions and confirmations and we regularly attended mass as children, although as we got older this habit (which primarily existed to please my grandparents, who were strong Catholics) gradually died out. I attended Catholic all-girls schools; however, this was more due to a distinct lack of other educational options rather than my parents' desire to ensure our Catholic education. School, like many Irish people in the early 2000s, was my primary introduction to religion. While in primary school, the majority of religious education focused on simplified biblical stories and the message to 'treat others how you wish to be treated', in my Catholic secondary school it became more overt, and at times, oppressive. Catholicism became a justification for conservatism, and as a self-identified feminist from the age of about fourteen, I took issue with this. Gradually, the church became less and less prominent in my life. I can't say I had much issue with this seeing as I had never really been sure that I believed in much of it anyway.

Although I don't remember ever being told outright that being queer was wrong in the eyes of the church, I do believe I was conscious of it in some way, whether through those around me, or the media. Still, it seemed somewhat removed from me, partly because I hadn't realised that I was queer yet, and partly because I hadn't come across the idea in my own church community. It wasn't until the lead up to the 2015 referendum to legalise same-sex marriage. At this point it became clear that for the Irish church, queerness was unacceptable, and I started to see the influence of this stance on those around me. School administration

forbade students from showing support for marriage equality on the premises while turning a blind eye to members of staff who sported 'Vote No' badges in class or behind the reception desk. People I had known for the majority of my life came out against same-sex relationships, claiming it to be 'unnatural' or 'against the sanctity of marriage'. It became gradually apparent to me that the Catholic church was a major source of these opinions, which only fuelled my dislike. It was around this time that I began to realise my own queer identity (up until this point I had just considered myself a very dedicated ally), and I started the process of coming out during my college years. I was met with some resistance from family, although not on the basis of religious views, excluding a couple of exceptions. All have since come round and are accepting of mine and my partner's relationship,

In her article "Queer Treasons", Kathryn Conrad discusses 'how and why homosexuality has been placed outside the limited discourse of what constitutes 'Irishness' (124), so that 'the homosexual' has been situated as 'the foreign at home, the free-floating moral contaminant' (127). Similarly, Irish writer Emma Donoghue has also expressed the incongruence between an Irish identity and a lesbian identity, writing of 'the question that haunted [her] teenage years: "how is a woman who loves women to live as an Irishwoman?"' (qtd. in Lacey 7). It seems that for many, Irish identity has intrinsically excluded queerness, that the two cannot exist in harmony with one another. At times I'll admit I have felt this way. At other times, among other Irish queers, I have never felt prouder to be both queer and Irish. Again, I lie at this point of 'in-betweenness'. Between those who have felt that their Irish identity and queer identity were at odds with one another and those who have never had the thought cross their mind. Between those who felt they had to let go of a religion that they found comfort in because it did not accept them, and those who have found a way to reconcile their Catholicism and their queerness. This is the point from which I operate, the point from which I write this thesis.

Overview of chapters

This thesis is divided into three main chapters, each with individual subdivisions. Chapter two is divided into four sections and focuses on defining queer Irish Identity. It begins with a brief overview of the history and impact of British colonialism in Ireland, and the subsequent rise of the Catholic church. The second section examines in more detail the power held by the Catholic church and its institutions. I focus on the parish as a community space in which conservative ideals of Irishness are upheld, and draw from Irish people's personal experiences of two Irish institutions in which the church has had major influence; in the education system and in the Gaelic Games Association (G.A.A.) The third section examines the so-called "death" of the Catholic church in Ireland, the decline in its presence and power in the lives of Irish people. I discuss the emergence of the Catholic *habitus* as defined by Tom Inglis, as well as highlighting changes in Irish cultural attitudes and consequently, legislation, which have led to the Ireland seen today. The fourth and final section builds upon the contextual framework of the previous three, to explore what it means to be queer in Ireland today. I examine how Irish attitudes to the queer community have changed in recent years and draw from experiences of anonymous interviewees to highlight the evolving relationship between Irish identity and queer identity. In its entirety, this chapter takes the approach of thick description, following Geertz as outlined above, to examine in as much detail as possible the context from which the music this study focuses on arises.

Chapter three is similarly divided, this time into six sections. Returning to Sinéad O'Connor, I draw from her music a contextual framework for examining my case studies, outlining three theoretical strands that appear across her work in relation to popular music and religion: the beautiful and the familiar; the subversive and the protesting; and the personal and the therapeutic. This section is predominantly influenced by the theories

detailed above in the realm of popular music and religion, in particular Ostwalt's idea of bidirectional secularisation, and Forbes' popular culture and religion in dialogue. This then forms the basis for the following sections, the first of which introduces my first and primary case study, Pillow Queens. The fourth, fifth and six sections each focus on one of the band's songs and their accompanying music videos: "Gay Girls", "Liffey" and "Hearts & Minds". In each example, I examine the appearance of Catholic imagery and language and how it is used to different (subversive) effects. I draw comparisons between their music and that of Sinéad O'Connor, to explore how similar styles, approaches and techniques are used in their music, as well as the more overtly queer aspect of Pillow Queen's musical performance that is absent in O'Connor's.

Finally, chapter four explores ideas of queer identity, community and belonging. I return to personal experience as well as those of the anonymous participants whom I interviewed, to explore music's role in the construction of both collective and personal queer identity. Following this, I examine the relationship between music spaces (and in particular queer music spaces) and religious spaces. Drawing from theories in religion and popular culture as outlined above, I discuss the similarities drawn between music and religion, including the existence and idolisation of figureheads or leaders, sense of community and belonging, and transcendental or 'out-of-body' experience facilitated by music. With this as the context, I examine some more examples from the music of Pillow Queens, focusing specifically on the construction of identity through their music, elaborating on the subversion of homonormative and religious ideals of marriage and family. I also discuss my secondary case study, Orla Gartland and how she articulates experiences of queer Irishness in her music, and the impact of this for queer listeners. Lastly, I will explore how the music of my case studies, in creating relatability for the Irish queer audience is not only creating a kind of new

religion that accepts them but allows for the imagining of a quasi-religious queer Irish utopia in which our experiences are shared, understood and celebrated.

Chapter 2: Queer Irish Identity

Ireland, colonialism, and Catholicism

In the 1995 publication, *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland: Towards the 21st Century*, lesbian Irish poet Mary Dorcey strikingly describes life in 1960s Ireland, recalling the defining characteristics of “silence. Repression. Censorship... Nuns and priests everywhere... [and] fear and suspicion surrounding anything to do with the body or the personal life” (25). While she acknowledges that the Ireland she lives in now is “so far removed from the Ireland of twenty years ago it might be another country” (25)¹, the impact of Catholicism and the church’s teachings are still deeply entrenched in Irish identity. Catholicism, its teachings, and its culture have influenced the Irish psyche to such an extent for reasons spanning a political, social and civil context that is as vast as it is complex. In order to give important context to this thesis, I believe it is crucial that I examine contemporary Irish identity, which is in my view, inseparable from the Catholic church and its institutions. Therefore, this chapter will explore the lasting impact of the Catholic Church on the Irish people, the relationship between LGBTQ+ life and Catholicism, and the experiences of LGBTQ+ Irish people who live in a state haunted by a past of Catholic-induced shame, guilt and repression.

It is true that Irish society has progressed significantly since the time described above by Mary Dorcey, and that Ireland is generally regarded as having become more liberal in recent years. In fact, this phenomenon is evident to such an extent that Niall O’Dowd, author

¹ Note that ‘now’ refers to Ireland in the mid-nineties since this quote was published in 1995, however is indicative of the change that took place in the country in the late 20th century, and into the 2000s.

of *A New Ireland: How Europe's Most Conservative Country Became Its Most Liberal*, notes that he wrote the book in response to “the sheer number of interested Americans who asked [him] what on earth had gone on in Ireland with so much radical change in recent years” (Acknowledgements). In his book, O’Dowd details this transformation, with reference to constitutional alterations such as the legalisation of divorce in 1995, the passing of the Marriage Equality Act in 2015, and the 2018 referendum to repeal the 8th amendment. These changes are significant since, as he highlights, the Irish constitution was written in large part by the Catholic Church in 1937. Furthermore, O’Dowd examines in-depth the role of archbishop John Charles McQuaid (known as the “Catholic Ruler of Ireland”) not only in the writing of the Irish constitution, but also in the formation of a so-called ‘special relationship’ between the Catholic church and the state (ch. 25). Unsurprisingly, this had a major impact on the conservative views of the Irish people. Indeed, almost every chapter makes reference to the Catholic church as the primary upholder of Irish conservatism, continually asserting itself in opposition to the liberalisation of Ireland.

So how did the Irish Catholic church become Ireland's most powerful institution? Much ink has been spilled in trying to examine the exact circumstances that led to the Catholic Church’s monopolisation of the Irish moral and religious identity, or as it was christened by Emmett Larkin, “The Devotional Revolution” (625). Prior to the arrival of Christianity with St. Patrick in the fifth century, Ireland was a polytheistic pagan country. However, early Christianity in Ireland did not seek to eradicate existing paganistic practices, but rather integrated them with Catholic beliefs (Charles-Edwards 182-240). There were subsequent attempts to modernise the Irish Catholic church, but it wasn’t until the plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the introduction of the penal laws that Catholicism began to become synonymous with Irish national identity, as the Irish people resisted the influx of Protestantism. It was at this point that the Irish Catholic identity also

became for many a political identity, since Protestantism was the religion of the coloniser, the followers of whom remained loyal to the British Monarchy (Bartlett 62). However, this alone does not account for the so-called “Irish Devotional Revolution”, the reasons for which seem to be bound up not only in religious identity, but also in other elements of Irish identity at that time. Larkin argued that the shift was primarily a response to the loss of the Irish language, and by extension the loss of the Irish identity; “Irishmen who were aware of being Irish were losing their identity, and this accounts in large part for their becoming practising Catholics... [the devotional revolution] provided the Irish with a substitute symbolic language and offered them a new cultural heritage with which they could identify and be identified and through which they could identify with one another” (Larkin 649). The British colonisation of Ireland and everything that came with it meant that the Irish population, or what was left of it following the Famine, was without a sense of self that an institution such as the Catholic Church could provide. This idea has been developed further to include intersections of emerging class dynamics in Ireland, as well as the process of modernisation that was occurring more broadly in Europe at the time (Inglis *Moral Monopoly* 2-8). It seems that the Catholic church’s rise to power was not due to any one reason, but a combination of factors that were involved in the modernisation of Ireland from a collection of savage pagan others to a civilised moral society - an idea that was predominantly a product of English Imperialism. (Canny 588)

It follows then, that when the Republic of Ireland did eventually gain its independence from England, the Catholic Church had a wealth of influence in the formation of the new state. Theoretically, the Irish constitution denotes a separation from church and state in that no concordat exists, the church is a voluntary organisation that is not funded by the state and clergy are forbidden to partake in politics (Whyte 15). However, given that the Irish people were predominantly devoted Catholics at the time, the influence of the Catholic Church’s

teachings was reflected in the document. Moreover, Eamonn De Valera, who supervised the writing of the constitution had a close relationship with the aforementioned McQuaid, allowed the archbishop to provide significant input on sections of the constitution relating to education, the family, and work. It was also McQuaid who suggested that the constitution should note the “special relationship” between the Catholic Church and the Irish state (Cooney 100). Although this was removed by referendum in 1973, and indeed a significant number of changes have been made to the constitution since its ratification, the Catholic church’s influence is still evident, most prominently in the document’s preamble (also written by McQuaid), which begins:

In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred, we, the people of Éire, Humbly acknowledging all our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ, Who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial(...) (*The Constitution of Ireland*)

While McQuaid was personally responsible for many of the direct references to Catholicism in the constitution, his views were upheld not only by the writers of the document, but also by the Irish people as whole. As noted, “It is a constitution which embodied the Catholic principles of the nation - a constitution which found its inspiration in the Papal Encyclical” (qtd. in Cooney 94). While feminist movements of the time did criticise the constitution for its reference to “the woman’s life within the home”² (Murray 517), the Irish people were inextricably tied to the Catholic church even before the constitution was drafted. By 1937, the church already had significant power over the Irish moral psyche through a number of social spaces and institutions in Ireland, most notably the education system. The following section

² This remains in the constitution today under article 41.2., although plans to hold a referendum for its amendment are in motion (Horgan-Jones).

will provide an overview of these spaces, while also drawing from first-hand experiences of queer Irish people, of what it means to exist as a queer person in those spaces.

The Catholic church and its institutions in Ireland

At present, the Catholic church in Ireland is organised into twenty-six dioceses, and over 1,000 parishes. Traditionally, the parish is much more than a religious territorial unit, but has become synonymous with the local community, particularly in rural settings (McCafferty and O’Keeffe 59). Further to this, I argue that the contemporary Irish parish is a social and cultural space in which historically the ideals of being a ‘good Catholic’, and by extension a good Irish person, are upheld. Much of Irish life and community has traditionally been built around the parish. This is not limited to the church itself (though as a child Sunday mass was as much a social event as religious practice), but can also encompass the local schools, businesses, pubs, sports teams, and charity organisations run by the people who are a part of this parish community. The parish centre in my hometown is a space where I have practised yoga, attended charity coffee mornings and volunteered as a teenager. It is, I believe, largely why Ireland is known for its close-knit communities. This section examines some of these common elements of the parish, how they inform the modern Irish community, and how they maintain a Catholic ideal of Irishness even today, drawing on personal experience as well as the experiences of other queer Irish people

One of the major ways in which the Catholic Church has maintained its presence in the Irish parish, and particularly in the lives of young people of Ireland for such a sustained length of time is through the education system. Today, of 3,126 standard primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, 88% are Catholic. 47.2% of secondary schools are Catholic, a smaller but not insignificant number (*Statistical Bulletin*). This is primarily because, as noted by Griffin, the Catholic church was historically responsible for providing accessible

education to the majority of Irish people (55). Following the eventual abolition of the penal laws that prevented Irish Catholics from accessing education, various Catholic organisations began setting up schools for the education of Catholics to replace the hedge schools of the 18th century. In 1831, the Stanley Letter proposed a national system of education for children in the United Kingdom, of which Ireland was a part. Although the proposed system was non-denominational, the system quickly became denominational, with the majority of schools becoming either Catholic or Protestant run. Given that the Catholic church had proven itself to be a reputable organisation for education, the state was content to hand over the responsibility of education of the masses to the church, leading to a “mutually beneficial” relationship throughout the 20th century that was “pivotal to the development of a cohesive, progressive, education system in an otherwise poor and underdeveloped country” (Griffin 56, 55). The church’s monopoly over education gave it significant power over the Irish people, particularly in a new country that was struggling to assert its national identity, as outlined in the previous section. The result was several generations of Irish people who were educated under a strictly Catholic doctrine, often directly by nuns, priests and brothers. It is no wonder then, that Catholicism maintained its monopoly over the Irish people for so long; as Inglis notes; “caring for the sick, poor, and uneducated has always been a major source of the Church’s moral power” (Inglis *Moral Monopoly* 124).

As mentioned previously nearly 90% of Irish primary schools are under control of the Catholic church, however it is true that the implications of this have changed significantly. Where the majority of teachers in Catholic schools in the past consisted of nuns, priests and brothers, virtually no clergy remain teachers in Irish schools, with the last recorded number being a total of eighty in 2014 (Ring). In 2018, the so-called ‘baptism barrier’, which gave priority in assigning places in Catholic schools to baptised Catholic children, was removed. In the same year, Dublin saw a ten percent decrease in the number of children being baptised,

compared with a consistent five percent drop per annum in the years prior (Gallagher et. al). The way in which religion is taught in schools has also changed dramatically, most notably with the 2016 removal of Rule 68, which declared that: “of all parts of the school curriculum, religious instruction is by far the most important, as its subject matter, God’s honour and service, includes the proper use of all man’s faculties” (qtd. in Krakow). While religious education remains prominent in Irish schools, it differs vastly from when I attended school, and even more so from my parents’ and grandparents’ schooling experiences. This will come as no surprise to any Irish person - the education system is changing to reflect the changing landscape of Irish society, driven by new generations of teachers who wish to see a system that aligns with a more modern and inclusive view of Irish identity. What is surprising however, is the extent of difference in such short spaces of time. Even between my own experience, and that of some of the participants who graduated just a few years after me, the change is significant.

While I cannot speak to the experiences of queer Irish people in the school system today, both my own education and that of the participants that I interviewed for this study reflect the long-lasting impact of this monopoly on generations of Irish queer people. Across the interviews I conducted, the majority of participants attended Catholic primary schools, with some (particularly more rural schools) having a very strong Catholic presence. Participants described attending mass at least once a week during school time or being taught to recite prayers with little understanding of the texts themselves. In one case, a participant who attended a Catholic primary school in the early 2000s, detailed a routine quizzing of primary school students to ensure that they had attended mass with their family at the weekend:

The teachers would ask us when we went to school [on Monday if we had] been to mass at the weekend and we'd have to prove it by telling them what the readings

were...[if a student was unable to recall the sermon or if they hadn't attended} the teacher would never outwardly make you know that it was bad, but it was kind of supposed to embarrass you in front of everyone else (anonymous).

Preparation for the sacraments was also a large part of primary school, although few participants recall little about the process beyond creating artworks and sitting through tedious rehearsals. Actual understanding of the sacraments was of little importance - the emphasis was more so on following the rules.

We were doing our first confession and one girl said, 'I have nothing to [confess] to the priest' and the teacher told her to make [a confession] up (anonymous)³

It seems that primary school religious education was as much about *performing* Catholicism as about being an active participant in it. As one interviewee fittingly put it:

I think in pushing [religion] down our throats so much they kind of missed the point. They weren't teaching us about the foundations of Catholicism or the moral values that Catholicism upholds. We just saw it as something that kind of hindered the fun of childhood. It was just a chore. No kids really understood what we were doing, and it wasn't really explained to us. It was more like 'just do what you're told, just say your prayers' because that's what you had to do (anonymous).

In my own experience, 'Catholic ethos' was a phrase that was thrown around a lot during my school years. Aside from attending school-wide masses at Christmas, Easter and other Catholic holidays, there were voluntary student 'mercy leaders' in each year group, who were tasked with upholding the Catholic ethos of the school. Religion was taken as a non-exam subject (aptly described by one interviewee as "let's be Catholic time"), and so we were rarely taught about religions other than Catholicism. Sexual education was minimal and was generally accompanied with strong Catholic and conservative undertones. I recall one

³ I have found that the majority of Irish people I have talked to about their first confession recall making up something to tell the priest - after all, what 'sins' is a seven- or eight-year-old child expected to have committed?

incident in particular in my Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) class where, when asked about forms of contraception other than abstinence, our teacher responded that she was unable to talk about them due to the Catholic ethos of the school. In a similar vein, our science teacher was required to add abstinence to the list of contraception methods when teaching the human reproduction chapter, despite it not being listed in the book. Student artworks were frequently forbidden to be displayed in the school - most memorably a painting of a grapefruit that was deemed 'inappropriate' given that it too closely resembled a vulva. In more recent years, attempts by staff and students alike to set up LGBTQ+ inclusive groups or organise LGBTQ+ education workshops have been shut down by the school on the basis of the school's ethos.

Even in so-called multi or non-denominational schools, Catholicism seems to remain the norm, primarily due to the teachers working there personally identifying as Catholic. Two separate participants remarked on the presence of Catholicism in their supposedly non-denominational schools:

It was just a state school, it had no denomination but at the same time, even though it technically wasn't a religious school, I remember the principal made everyone in assembly say a Catholic prayer in the morning, and you would get into trouble – basically you were kind of shunned if you didn't say it so everyone just did to fit in, which looking back is kind of mad (anonymous).

The school was multi denominational - and it was for the most part, except I remember we had a Christmas mass, and I remember that the teachers] said it would be multi denominational and then when we got there, [the mass] was just Catholic (anonymous).

It appears that across many Irish schools, with or without denomination, Catholicism has remained the default, upheld by a minority of strongly Catholic teachers. The impact of these teachers on their students, and in particular their queer students is tangible. One participant referred to their religion teachers at school as their ‘main introduction to homophobia’, describing a teacher who campaigned against the same-sex marriage referendum during class time, and teachers who made openly homophobic comments in class. They described how an off-hand homophobic comment by a teacher impacted them:

I remember being so shocked by her saying it and so hurt because I really liked this teacher. And then I remember that it seemed to give permission to girls in the class to start to mimic that kind of talk... those kinds of [homophobic] comments came out much more openly after the teachers were modelling that kind of behaviour, and I remember... I thought that everyone thought that way and they were all just waiting for permission to talk about it (anonymous).

While nowadays one would hope that such comments in a classroom would not be tolerated by school administration, a mere ten or so years ago, it was unlikely that it would have been questioned. Until 2015, Catholic schools were permitted to discriminate against employees who “may contradict their ethos”, (i.e. LGBTQ+ employees, as well as divorcees and single parents), so it’s unsurprising that teachers felt so comfortable expressing homophobic views (Barry). As recently as 2021, PDST (Professional Development for Secondary Teachers) resources contained teaching material that asked teenage students to discuss inflammatory, false statements such as “all gays molest children”, “all gays are HIV positive”, “you can change from being a homosexual”, and “homosexuals try to make others homosexual” (Horgan, Pannett). For a young person, school is one of the first community spaces that they interact with outside of the family. To witness such homophobia from the authority figures in such a space, to not have openly queer teachers, the impact is tenfold; it

sends the same message that so many queer Irish people feel on some level: that we do not belong, and that it is not acceptable to exist as a queer person in certain Irish spaces.

A second institution closely linked to the parish and to Irish identity is the Gaelic Athletic Association (from here referred to as the G.A.A.). I'll admit that I was surprised when the G.A.A. came up in research interviews - I was not a particularly athletic child (much to my father's disappointment), so my first-hand experiences with the G.A.A. are next to none. What is unsurprising however, is that the G.A.A., like many other aspects of Irish society, and particularly those that are connected to Irish cultural identity, is a space in which ideals of Irishness and Catholicism are upheld - and from which Queer people can often feel ostracised. In "The G.A.A. - 'Part of What We Are'? A Centenary Assessment" Fr. Liam Ryan argues that the combination of the G.A.A. and the Catholic church throughout the 20th century created "a unit of organisation, a community entity, which came very close to realising" the ideals put forward by T.S. Eliot in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (752).

A small and mostly self-contained group attached to the soil and having its interests centred in a particular place, with a kind of unity which may be designed, but which also has to grow through generations. [it] must not be solely religious, nor solely social; nor should the individual be a member of two separate, or even overlapping units, one religious and the other social... the unitary community should be religious-social, and it must be one in which all social classes have their centre of interest (qtd in Ryan 752).

Indeed, the two were historically closely linked. Founded in 1884, the G.A.A. was formed in response to the threat to Irish identity and culture, in an effort to preserve traditional Irish games. Due to the aforementioned threat to Irish identity, any attempt to preserve it was by default politicised, and by extension, nationalist. As a result of this, the church was initially suspicious of the G.A.A., believing it to be a creation of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, to

whom they were vehemently opposed (Cronin et. al 4). In spite of this, the G.A.A. decided to follow parish boundaries for the organisation of the association. Although the move was considered “a matter of convenience, not one of religious devotion” (246), this led to a close symbiotic relationship developing between the two throughout the 20th century, with the G.A.A. and the Catholic Church as some of the “guardians of the spirit of the nation”, (Murphy 154). Up until the late 1960s, many important matches were commenced by a bishop throwing in the ball, and until 2016 the Archbishop of Cashel and of Emly would present the trophy to the captain of the All-Ireland-winning minor teams, although he remains a guest of honour at the same event. (Walsh). The G.A.A. has long been a cultural touchstone of what constitutes Irishness, and its historically close relationship with the Catholic church further consolidates the deep connection between Irish identity and Catholic identity.

Although the G.A.A., like many other aspects of Irish society, has become increasingly detached from the church, it has by no means achieved complete secularisation. I have no doubt that the church’s involvement in the G.A.A. has indeed lessened over time, however like our schooling system, this does not negate its impact up to now. One interviewee spoke about the Catholic presence in their G.A.A. club growing up:

[The Catholic Church didn’t directly influence the team] but all of our training and matches were always scheduled to accommodate mass. My club was named after the parish, and it was very parish-oriented and very church-oriented and mass-oriented. So, everyone, when they weren’t socialising at training or in the pub, they were at mass, and I didn’t go to mass, so I didn’t have that. There was definitely a massive religious influence there, indirectly because everything was accommodated, or revolved around that central idea of mass being the most important part of the week. They’d go to mass and then to the local pub or to watch the match (anonymous).

The above quote shows the lasting presence of the Catholic church not only in the G.A.A., but in Irish life as a whole. This sense of Irish national identity that was, and still is very much connected to the church, and its conservative values, as Roisin Lanigan writes, “that same nationalism has been closely tied with traditionalism, which has manifested itself in conservative, deeply religious homophobia, transphobia and misogyny” (Lanigan). McDevitt even goes as far as to argue that the G.A.A. has historically been underpinned by Catholic ideas of suffering:

The inherent physical discomfort associated with intense training and the playing of contact games meshes with wider Catholic teaching on pain and on the salvation brought about through suffering. The image of a healthy male body enduring the agony of crucifixion was one of the most important images of shared Irish life, if not the primary one ... The theme of sacrificing the male body for the salvation of Ireland was shared throughout much of the nationalist community (qtd. in Ging and Free 225).

The G.A.A. has long been a space for ideals of Irish culture and identity to play out. For those in the focus group of this study who participated in G.A.A. in their youth then, it became another space in which they felt othered from Irishness:

I didn't fit in that {G.A.A.} environment at all but it was such an important part of being Irish, and you had to be proud, like [I was told] ‘this is such a core part of your life as an Irish person’, and by virtue of being queer it was something that made me feel like I'd never actually belong in that role (anonymous),

As Ging and Free acknowledge, there is an “unspoken but founding principle of Irish cultural life, namely that homosexuality and the GAA could never coexist” (218). It seems that this principle still exists, at least on some level. Donal Óg Cusack became the first inter-

county G.A.A. player to openly come out as gay in 2009, and while the response was predominantly supportive, no male player has come out since (Cormican). In another positive step, the first LGBTQ+ G.A.A. club, Na Gaeil Aeracha, was formed in 2020 and currently has over 140 members (Lanigan). Despite this, the G.A.A. as a whole remains a very heteronormative space in Irish society.⁴ If the G.A.A. is considered intrinsic to being Irish, but a space largely inaccessible to the LGBTQ+ community, it is not surprising that so many Irish Queer people have felt a dissonance between their Irish identity and their sexual identity at one point or another.

These are just two examples that demonstrate the lasting influence of the church on Irish cultural spaces. Not mentioned is the similar impact on hospitals and healthcare, the home and the family, and the local community, whether through legislation, presence of clergy people, or as seen in the case of the G.A.A., deeply entrenched cultural ideas. Furthermore, the church's involvement in creating and particularly funding these spaces created a debt of the Irish people to the church, since for generations they were responsible for the education of the masses, caring for the sick, and the creation of local community and identity. It is difficult to imagine where Ireland would be without the church, although the changes in these institutions over time suggest we are beginning to divorce the church from our collective identity. These developments are not coincidental. They are a result of the tireless work of countless activists to enact change in order to create an Ireland that is more liberal, inclusive and tolerant.

The “quiet” revolution

⁴ It is also worth noting that many of these spaces are strictly gendered, which also contributes to the exclusion of queer people. One third of Irish secondary schools are single-gender, the second-highest number in Europe, G.A.A. teams remain segregated by gender, and has been criticised for its gender inequality (Archer).

On the 27th of May 2018, then-Taoiseach Leo Varadkar addressed the public following the referendum to repeal the 8th amendment, which had restricted abortion access in Ireland. The result, which was 66.4% in favour, was a landmark occasion for the country. During his speech, Varadkar remarked that “a quiet revolution has taken place” (Varadkar)⁵. Indeed, even the Taoiseach himself, as an openly gay man of Indian descent, could be seen as emblematic of this so-called revolution.⁶ O’Dowd provides what is probably the most up-to-date account of the events and circumstances that lead to such radical change in Ireland. He argues that the “winds of change” had begun to blow in Ireland by the 1970s, with the mobilisation of the Women’s Liberation Movement, the revival of Irish traditional music, and the emergence of political figures such as Mary Robinson and Donogh O’Malley (ch.32). He writes, ‘a more authentic Irish identity was struggling to emerge, associating broad culture with joy and insight and not with suspicion and censorship’ (ch. 28). While perhaps quite a bold statement to describe Ireland in the 1970s, he is at least partially correct. 1973 saw the removal of the Catholic church’s ‘special position’ from the constitution. In the same year, the country joined the European Union. Coupled with the Anglo-Irish Free Trade bill in 1965, led to economic growth and more interaction with the world beyond the Irish border. (O’Dowd ch. 29) Gradually, Ireland began to catch up with our neighbouring countries.

It was around this time that reports of abuse within the church’s institutions began to surface. However, it wasn’t until much later that these reports became widespread, and the extent of the abuse was realised. These scandals came to light, primarily towards the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century, with revelations of wide-spread abuse of women and children at the hands of Catholic clergy people across Catholic schools, the Magdalene

⁵ Varadkar has been criticised by the feminist movement in Ireland for his use of the term. Former Teachta Dála Ruth Coppinger highlighted the issue with Varadkar’s phrasing, in that it disregarded the “tens of thousands, primarily young people and women, loudly and actively campaigned...and were constantly told to tone it down”. Hence, I have chosen to include quotation marks in the title of this section.

⁶ This is not to present Varadkar as an icon of Irish progression; his political stance remains firmly centre-right, despite his personal identity.

Laundries and other institutions. The trauma was deeply personal. As Father Joseph Veale wrote in 2000:

All the people of God in Ireland, the whole body, have been wounded. The wound is not in anything so surface as loss of influence or diminished power. It is deeper than that, deeper too than the level of morality. It goes deeper, probably than we realise yet (296).

He was correct. Since 2000, multiple reports and investigations have shed light on nearly 15,000 cases of sexual abuse committed in Ireland between 1970 and 1990 (*Sins of the Fathers*) More shocking still was the way in which the church dealt with them, covering up crimes and moving those accused of abuse to different dioceses. As O'Dowd, referring to serial abuser Father Brendan Smyth, wrote:

What would eventually come out was when it came to choosing between a diagnosed psychopath and vicious pedophile—who was one of their own—and the helpless and tortured children he abused, the Church, including the Irish cardinals, chose the psychopath (ch. 30).

Time and time again, the church chose to protect abusers rather than bringing them to justice. The result was a devastating effect on the Irish people's faith in the Catholic church, and eventually, it's so-called the "death" (ch. 30). Unsurprisingly then, in recent years, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of Irish people who identify themselves as Catholic:

Table 2

Percentage distribution of Roman Catholic population in Ireland, 1926-2022

Year	Percentage
------	------------

1926	92.6
1946	94.3
1971	93.9
1991	86.8
2016	78.3
2022	69

(Central statistics office)

Other figures show a significant decrease in mass attendance, particularly in built up areas. A 2006 Poll conducted by Irish broadcasting network RTE found that mass attendance had dropped from 81% in 1990 to 40% (Embersen), and it would not be unfounded to assume that this figure has further decreased in the years since. Given the large disparity between these numbers, it is not unreasonable to assume that the majority of people who identified themselves to be Catholic in the 2021 Census are not attending mass. This is not to say that in order to identify as Catholic, or to follow Catholic beliefs, that one must consistently attend Catholic mass, however I do think the discrepancy is indicative of a wider trend of Irish people identifying as *culturally* Catholic. In *The Kink and I*, Mallory and Baldwin define a “cultural Christian” as someone who “has been reared in a Christian home, and who essentially views Christianity as ethics, as responsibility, respectability... all of which are part of a culture” (64). By extension, this definition can be applied to cultural Catholicism in Ireland; people are baptised, raised in (culturally) Catholic homes, attend Catholic schools and in most cases make their First Communion and Confirmation. However, the majority do not attend mass weekly and participate in the religion primarily through traditions, moral ideas and cultural practices. These people realise what Tom Inglis calls a “Catholic *habitus*” which he describes as “a deeply embodied, almost automatic way of being spiritual and moral that becomes second nature and creates a Catholic sense of self and a way of behaving and interpreting the world” (*Catholic Identity* 205). This habitus was reflected by participants in

this study, the majority of whom identified with Catholicism either in a cultural or social sense, or not at all:

I think that this is such an Irish thing, but like, I'm not Catholic in the religious sense, but I'm definitely socially Catholic, you know you're it's, it's that the mentality like in like everything that's drilled in from Catholicism that has nothing to do with the actual religion side of things (anonymous).

This new way of associating with Irish Catholicism, of maintaining the moral and ethical code of the religion without blindly following the church's doctrine, has played a large role in creating the Ireland seen today. While there is still an abundance of progress to be made both in terms of legislation as well as social and cultural attitudes, there is no denying that Ireland has made significant strides in recent years towards a more inclusive society, and one that is no longer so tightly bound in the shackles of Catholic conservatism.

LGBTQ+ Life in Ireland Now

Among these vast changes in the Republic of Ireland and its people, the experience of LGBTQ+ people in Ireland remains a specific space to occupy in the modern world. While in some ways it is easier to exist as a queer person in Ireland, in other ways it seems it is not. According to figures released by gardai, there has been a 29% increase in hate crimes last year, 22% of which were sexuality based (Fanucci). Moreover, the last few years have seen a dramatic increase in anti-trans rhetoric, with moral panic over supposed 'grooming' of trans youth, that is strongly reminiscent of the moral panic surrounding gay men during the HIV crisis of the 1980s and 90s. Recently, the infamous Enoch Burke case, in which a secondary school teacher was dismissed for refusal to address a transitioning student by their chosen

name and pronouns, claiming it went against his religious beliefs (Ní Aodha). Interestingly though, Enoch Burke (a fundamentalist evangelical Christian) is somewhat of an outlier these days. Much of the anti-LGBTQ+ discourse that exists now is no longer as religiously motivated as in the past, and the rhetoric seems to be less about LGBT people going against religious teachings, and more about the aforementioned moral panic surrounding queerness, primarily fuelled by a concerning growth of the far-right movement in Ireland. There is a growing argument that modern Irish conservatism has shifted from Catholic conservatism to populism (O'Connell) meaning that today's anti-LGBTQ+ hate is primarily being cultivated by a minority who do not necessarily have religious motivations for their beliefs.

I do believe however, that any kind of 'new' homophobia or transphobia in Ireland remains *rooted* in religion, in that it appeals to a specific Irish conservatism that prioritises ideals of 'traditional family values' that were propagated by the church, and still hold power in connection Irish identity today. Moreover, in queer people's individual experiences, Catholicism remains a concern, despite the apparent shift away from the church:

I do remember distinctly when I was 14 or 15 there being a point when I kind of realised 'oh my god, I'm gay' ... and then also 'that's going to be a problem, because of the whole Catholic thing'. And it wasn't even something I'd actively been aware of until then, so I don't know how [the two] became associated, apart from it being just the cultural thing. Nobody had ever told me outright that being gay was wrong, my family wasn't overtly homophobic in any way but... it was still immediately something I was concerned about. It was kind of this sense of doom that came with the whole queer coming out moment and that was the moment where I was like 'I can't be a true Catholic or uphold anything that my grandparents wanted because I'm

not like them, .and therefore I won't fit into my family's idea of being an Irish family' (anonymous).

Furthermore, fear of backlash (specifically Catholic homophobic backlash) when coming out seems to be a major experience for queer Irish people. One participant shared their experience of remaining closeted as a teenager due to their partner feeling unsafe coming out at home:

We didn't come out primarily because they still lived with their grandparents and their mother, and their grandparents were that kind of staunch Catholic -- so we were afraid that they would get kicked out (anonymous).

This is not unusual. In my own experience, I was initially discouraged from coming out to certain members of my extended family due to their Catholic beliefs, and I know of countless others who have had to hide their identity from conservative family members. However, another interviewee highlighted at least some of their apprehension surrounding coming out was rooted in expectations of what people's reactions would be based on their religion, rather than overt homophobic views:

It was more knowing that all of my family and friends are Catholic, mainly family like, you know, extended family and older relatives and stuff. And it was more thinking about how that fits into their world and how it just didn't, which is why I wasn't out for a very long time around my family. It was mainly down to what I understood them to believe based on their religion, as opposed to anything else (anonymous).

The homophobic legacy of the Catholic church has made us fearful. As noted by Ger Moane in 1995, the Catholic church is still 'the primary and most vocal source of condemnatory

views of homosexuality, and has provided the main justification for discrimination against, and hatred of, homosexual men and lesbians' (O'Carroll and Collins 88). While much has changed since this was written, it highlights the lasting impact of the church's homophobia. It is understandable then that for some, the Catholic habitus remains too linked to the institution of the church for reconciliation and has resulted in a necessary separation of Catholic identity from Irish identity. As one participant said:

Catholicism didn't really do anything for me except make me feel ashamed of myself and that has resulted in me now not identifying as a Catholic or as a Christian. And it doesn't really affect my pride as an Irish person, but I do think it's something that had to be divorced from my Irish identity (anonymous).

For others however, and in particular for the younger participants in the study, this relationship can be quite different. In fact, one interviewee actually felt that the Catholic influence in Ireland actually benefited them in coming out:

I do think the kind of fundamental tenets [of Catholicism], you know, of loving people or being kind- I really think that did help people accept me because it is a really good moral code (anonymous).

This quote raises an interesting viewpoint, that despite the traditionally conservative (and often anti-LGBTQ+) rhetoric of the church, the core teachings to "love thy neighbour as thyself" to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (*Bible* Luke 6.31, Matt.22.39), remain key facets of Irish cultural life⁷. Irish people are famed for their kindness, and I do believe that a large reason for this is the lessons taught to children in Ireland through the lens of Catholicism, and as in the case of the participant referenced

⁷ This idea is often referred to as the "Golden Rule" and should be noted that it is not exclusive to Christianity, appearing in almost all world religions (Flew 134).

above, these values have likely helped the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in Ireland. Still, the intersection of Irish Catholic identity and queer identity remains a point of contention for many. While attitudes are changing in Ireland, there is a persisting tension between queerness and the 'right' way to be Irish, although the responses of the younger participants seem to offer a positive perspective for future generations of queer people. The experiences of those that I spoke to suggest that they are beginning to take a reparative approach to their religious upbringings, rather than feeling that it is something that has to be detached entirely from their identity. One participant spoke quite openly about how their faith has changed over time:

I disconnected God from the Catholic Church in my brain. My spirituality at the time and still now is based in religion, was formed with religion, but I wouldn't say now it's connected to the institution of the church (anonymous).

While there is no unanimous experience of Irish queer people with the church, and it is difficult to make any general assumptions from such a small sample size, it seems that wherever one falls on the spectrum, the relationship is consistently something that has to be grappled with in one way or another. What is suggested however, is that for younger generations it doesn't carry the same weight as in the past. Perhaps in the future, it may not be an issue at all.

Chapter 3: “Holy Are We”: examining the religious language and imagery in music by queer Irish artists

All babies are born saying God's name
 Over and over, all born singing God's name
 All babies are flown from the universe
 From there they're lifted by the hands of angels
 God gives them the stars to use as ladders
 She hears their calls, She is mother and father (O'Connor “All Babies” 0.30-1.12).

The above lines appear in Sinéad O'Connor's “All Babies”, from the singer's fourth studio album, *Universal Mother*. The album, like much of O'Connor's music, is heavily influenced by her relationship with religion. The song was inspired by a rebirthing session which “completely blew [her] mind” (*Rememberings* 213). The same session was also the motivation behind the album cover, which was painted by O'Connor herself. Out of her extensive discography, much of which contains religious references, “All Babies” stands out in its reference to God as both a “she”, and as “mother and father”. Within Irish Catholicism, God is exclusively referred to as “He” and “Him”, or as the “Father”. O'Connor's decision to disregard this and refer instead to God as a divine feminine figure is a subversive choice. Moreover, the title of the album, *Universal Mother* further implies O'Connor finding spiritual connection within her own experience as a mother, and hence, as a woman. This could be read as her conflating herself, or indeed womanhood and/or motherhood with the divine, especially when considered within the context of the inspiration for both the song and the album cover. While this was not perhaps intended as a critique of the Christian canon but rather an expression of her own religious or spiritual identity, it highlights a key element of this chapter; that the way in which queer Irish musicians interact with religion in their music

often subverts the oppressive power of the images used. This transference of power, while potentially undermining, does not necessarily lessen its impact; as Ostwalt, who provides much of the foundation for this analysis, notes; “even if religious institutions lose authority, the power of religion does not diminish in scope- the location of that power might, however, shift in focus” (3). This chapter will explore this idea focusing on the use of religious imagery, allegory and allusion by contemporary queer Irish musicians. Following the theories of Forbes and Ostwalt as outlined in the introduction, this chapter explores any “explicit representations, allegorical parallels, and implicit theological themes” (Forbes 14) existent in the music of Pillow Queens, with the point of analysis being firstly, ‘how does this look?’, and from that asking; ‘why is it here?’ and consequently ‘what does this mean?’ These are the three primary questions I attempt to answer in relation to my case study in this chapter: to first identify the presence of religion, whether lyrically, sonically or visually (in the case of music videos), and to subsequently explore how it has come to appear, before using that as a basis to examine the impact and the effect of its being there, both on the listener and the artist who makes use of it.

Sinead O’Connor: A framework for my analysis

I felt it fitting to return to Sinead O’Connor to open this chapter, despite her not strictly fitting into the definition of artists that this study looks at. However, as noted in the introduction, I believe that her standing as an Irish cultural icon, as well as a musician who had a personally complex relationship with religion and a profound significance to the Irish LGBTQ+ community, make her an important figure in this discussion. Hence, I feel it useful to draw from her music a context for examining my case studies. I have identified three threads relating to religion that consistently reappear in her work:

1. the beautiful and the familiar;
2. the subversive and the protesting;
3. the confessional and the therapeutic.

Each of these strands are deeply interconnected and build upon one another to contextualise my case studies. What I am focusing on here is the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ as detailed above. These factors are evident not only in O’Connor’s music but also appear in that of my case studies, and I argue can be considered common themes across the music of Irish contemporary artists who reference religion in their music.

1. The beautiful and the familiar

Almost every one of Sinéad’s ten albums alludes to religion, faith, or spirituality in some way. Perhaps most overtly religious is her eighth studio album, *Theology* which was released in 2007 and the majority of which is inspired by the “very colourful and dramatic” psalms of the Old Testament, as well as her (brief) time spent studying theology at university (*Rememberings* 227). Speaking of the album, she said “I want to be very clear - there is no message. No preaching. Nothing deep and meaningful, nothing trouble- making. I simply wanted to make a beautiful thing” (sinead-oconnor.com). This assertion highlights one major reason why Catholic images so often appear in music of artists who grew up in that religion; that it is, put simply, very aesthetically beautiful. Both the Old and the New Testament are filled with vivid and evocative imagery that serve to convey the depth of the messages within the text, and to inspire awe, wonder and mystery in the reader. The church itself places notable emphasis on the concept of visual beauty as “a means of perceiving and understanding the nature of God” (Lohsen), visible in churches and cathedrals in Ireland and around the world with intricate stained-glass windows, ornate altars, elaborate artworks and

impressive architecture. In addition to visual arts, much sacred or liturgical music is also deeply moving, as composers similarly aim to capture the depth and magnitude of the texts and messages of the relevant religion.

O'Connor drew from this source for much of the powerful imagery and language in her music, often in quite subtle ways. The title from her first album, *The Lion and The Cobra* comes from Psalm 91, and the first track on the album "Never Get Old" opens with the Psalm recited in Irish by Enya. The singer's second album *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got* similarly features religious allusion, with the title track containing images of walking in the desert, as Jesus did after his baptism in the biblical narrative (*Bible* Matthew 4.1-11), coupled with references to the "bread of life", as Jesus pronounces himself in John 6.35 (*Bible*).

I'm walking through the desert
 And I am not frightened although it's hot
 (...)

 I have bread and I have wine
 No longer will I be hungry
 For the bread of life is mine (0.01-2.52).

The same song contains references to "The Serenity Prayer", an early 20th-century Christian invocation (Shapiro), and which the album begins with:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change
 Courage to change the things I can
 And the wisdom to know the difference (0.01-0.14)

The sentiment of the prayer is clearly echoed in the album's title. While these examples are from O'Connor's early discography, it was a trend that continued throughout her career, as in

Theology, but also many of her other albums. It seems that her tendency to draw inspiration from Catholic sources from her music continued in spite of her personally tumultuous relationship with the religion, suggesting that it was of such strong influence and presence in her life, that it could not be extracted from her music making.

Another significant element that contributes to this is language; much of the dialect of Catholicism is also very colourful and is inextricably woven into the Irish vernacular. It is a language that many Irish people grew up in and around, it is familiar to us, and is a large part of our culture. As highlighted in chapter two, the Irish people lost much of their identity to British colonialism, with a notable aspect of this being the erasure of the Irish language. While now, the English spoken in Ireland has been so influenced by the Irish language that it is best understood as a fusion of old Irish and old English, much of this influence is evident in the prominence of religious phrases and exclamations in the English colloquially spoken in Ireland, known as Hiberno English. Of course, this is not limited to the Irish experience; as Gilmour notes, the appearance of religious language in popular music is reflective of “the inestimable influence of biblical writings and concepts on the languages and cultures of the Christian and post-Christian western world” (67). However, in an Irish context I argue this influence is greater than average, given the historical power of the Catholic church in Ireland, and its impact on Irish identity and culture. Within these conditions, where Catholicism has permeated not only spiritual identity, but also cultural identity in terms of art, music and language, is it any wonder that so many artists, like O’Connor, are drawn towards taking inspiration from it, particularly when it contains some significance to them?

Still, the use of Catholic imagery in music is part of a dialogue between popular culture and religion, and to reduce it to aesthetics alone would be disingenuous; the use of religion in music because it is both beautiful and familiar is a direct result of the influence of

the power of the Catholic church in Ireland (as detailed in chapter two). Unsurprisingly then, religion appears in the music of many Irish artists. Often, however, its presence plays a greater role than being employed simply as a literary device. What it often reveals in fact, is a deeply traumatic and complex relationship that is expressed through the use of religious images in critical or subversive ways, which brings me to the next thread.

2. *The subversive and the protesting*

O'Connor's assertion that there is no "meaning" or "preaching" in the album is somewhat ironic for on several tracks, criticisms of religion appear as her own voice comes through, challenging and subverting elements of Catholic doctrine. In "Out of the Depths", for example, she addresses God directly, questioning the authority of religious doctrine:

And I've heard religion say you're to be feared
 But I don't buy into everything I hear
 And it seems to me, you're hostage to those rules
 That were made by religion, and not by you (1.15-2.02)

At one point in the song, she even wonders, "Is it bad to think you might like help from me?" (2.18-2.28). As in the example from *Universal Mother* above, there is a humanising of a God who within the Christian canon exists as a transcendental figure of absolute perfection. This highlights the subversive nature of Sinéad's music in its diversion from traditional Catholic teachings. This idea similarly appears in the single from the same album, "I Don't Know How to Love Him". The song, a cover of Mary Magdalene's solo from Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's 1970 rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and is the only New Testament song on the album. Speaking of her choice to record the song, she said:

I was eight years old when I first heard that song and I thought ‘That’s my song’.... It’s a lovely song and amongst religious songs, it’s very unusual in that it is also just a love song. I love the idea of Jesus being just a man (Hamby).

The musical itself was criticised by religious groups for its portrayal of Jesus as not only being ‘[stripped] not only of His deity but even of His morality’ (Faith Free Presbyterian Church). Despite a later assertion that the song “doesn’t belong here [on the album]” (*Rememberings* 228), it does feel like the perfect choice for O’Connor. Her desire to humanise God, to “[bring] God off the page. Let everyone see the humanity of God, the vulnerability, the moodiness, the emotionality” (226-7) is so at odds with much of the teachings of the traditional Catholic church, but so in line with her own personal spirituality. Moreover, it is indicative of the collapse of the sacred and the profane dichotomy evident in much of the music examined here, and, to refer back to Ostwalt, the significant shift of authority that occurs when religion appears in popular music. What is brought forward from this are two ideas. Firstly, when an Irish person interacts with Catholicism in their music, there is always something more to be examined there; the history, the context of Irish cultural identity and the church does not allow it to be one-dimensional, and it cannot be separated from its context. Secondly, that it can almost always be read as subversive in nature, whether intended by the artist as such or not. While in some cases, O’Connor has been deliberately disruptive, for example in the case of “Take off Your Shoes” from *How About I Be Me*, which she described as “blasphemous by intent” (and also as one of the songs she is most proud of) (*Rememberings* 229), more often her tendency towards subversion seems to appear almost unintentionally, influenced by her personal values.

In some ways perhaps this is unsurprising: O’Connor insisted on defining herself as a protest singer rather than a pop star, and did not shy away from expressing (often

controversial) political statements in her musical performance, she often utilised genres typically associated with protest, including reggae and rap music while maintaining a deep respect for the significance of these styles. Aside from her infamous protest on SNL (detailed in chapter one), she wrote an extensive number of songs highlighting various political causes, examples including “Black Boys on Mopeds”, which called attention to police brutality against young black men in the United Kingdom, or “Famine”, which addressed the lasting impact of British colonialism on the Irish people. The latter also addresses the connection between British occupation and the Irish people’s relationship to religion:

And we say we're a Christian country
 But we've lost contact with our history
 See, we used to worship God as a mother
 We're suffering' from post traumatic stress disorder (2.30-2.41)

This line additionally highlights the God-as-mother archetype seen across much of her music, often used in conjunction with the image of the child.

As in the example in the opening of this chapter, she regularly drew from her own experience as a parent in her music making to deal with themes of motherhood in a personal sense, but also to make points in a broader sense about religion, politics and collective identity. O'Connor used the representation of the child in a similar way, and in particular as a symbol of Ireland. As David Clare writes, she “returned to images of abused or endangered children in her lyrics and live performances not simply with an eye towards exorcising her own personal demons but also as part of her attempts to make strident political statements related to Ireland and – on occasion – the wider world” (214). “Famine”, for example, contains the lines: “See we're like a child that's been battered”, “The most child-like trusting people in the Universe / And this is what's wrong with us” and “I see the Irish / As a race like a child / That got itself bashed in the face” (2.45-3.08).

Scholars have also connected O'Connor's voice to this image; much has been written about the duality of her singing, and her use of two distinct voices. As Nolan notes, she "typically modulates between pure, soaring power and angry yelping or screaming" (55) the latter is often read as a manifestation of the abused child image, sonically reinforcing the image while also adding to its impact. The voice has become an increasingly focused-upon area of study, not only within the field of musicology, but also in anthropology, sociology and beyond. Following Amanda Weiman's comprehensive review of studies on the voice in various fields, I consider here the voice as "a crucial site where the realms of the cultural and sociopolitical link to the level of the individual, a site where shared discourses and values, affect, and aesthetics are made manifest in and contested through embodied practice" (38). In other words, I read the voice as a space where the social, cultural and personal connect, as well as a locus for subversion. As Cavarero notes, "the drives of the body, of which the voice is an expression, makes the voice ideal for subverting the order of language and thus of politics" (199). O'Connor's voice was her protest, particularly in the two voices she used in her music, as well as the raw and intimate voice that was her trademark. Through this she embodied what Dillane refers to as a "lived feminism" (57), challenging authority through her music not only lyrically but also sonically via her voice. She was in her entirety a subversive figure of Irish pop culture, not alone in her distinctive voice, but also in her performance, her appearance, and her engagement with Irish political and social issues, in particular (and as is most relevant for this thesis) religion.

3. The confessional and the therapeutic

In addition to the subversive element of vocal embodiment, Nolan's reference to O'Connor's two voices highlights the immensely personal element of her music, exemplified through her employment of various vocal techniques. The nature of the voice in its innate

connection to the body situates it at a point of intimacy not achieved by other musical practices; O'Connor used her voice not only to emphasise thematic and lyrical statements in her songs, but also to convey a more intimate expression of her own experiences. Eimear Nolan aptly describes this twofold dynamic:

The more adult, articulate voice promised self-expression and the opportunity to become an artist, while the immature, inarticulate voice represents the inchoate cry of the abused child... This second voice, it could easily be assumed, is her way of recreating the pain of her childhood (55)

She acknowledged this herself, noting that “there was always a sound that I was trying to get from myself, which is the sound I made as a child ... The howling. That was the sound that I'd blocked off” (qtd. In Nolan 55). These two quotes summarise the third and final thread detailed in this section: the personal, confessional element of O'Connor's music, coupled with the use of music making to grapple with, and perhaps even at times, heal, personal and collective traumatic experiences.

O'Connor's vocal performance can also be examined in the context of Weidman's three “metaphorical elaborations,” which regard the voice as the revelation of an inner self, as a conveyor of truth, as evidence of authenticity (38). This is particularly pertinent given the aforementioned duality of the singer's voice, as well as her emotionally charged approach to singing, which was heavily inspired by her experience with the Italian vocal technique *bel canto*. In her own words, the approach “has nothing to do with scales or breathing or any of that kind of stuff. The whole concept is that the emotions take you to the notes” (Rememberings 209)⁸. It seems that the decisions in her music performance, and more

⁸ While relevant to O'Connor, this is perhaps not the most accurate definition. While *bel canto* does emphasise emotional expression, it also stresses a high level of technical skill in order for the singer to make performance decisions that either maximise or minimise certain utterances (Toft 3-4).

specifically in her singing, are profoundly connected to a desire to achieve a more emotional expression. She noted that her training in and understanding of *bel canto* also directly influenced her choice to sing in her native Irish accent, despite having sung in an American accent on her first two albums (209). Her accent on the later albums situates the music within a distinctly Irish context, while also adding to the intensely confessional element in her music. The result is a product that not only engages the listener to understand more about O'Connor through her music, but also creates relatability and hence depth for the outcasted (queer) Irish audience.

The intimacy of Sinéad O'Connor's music is not limited to voice. Writing about her musical persona, Negus points out that this was not only created through "the use of a restrained, intimate voice, recorded softly and close to the microphone", but also in various lyrical, arrangement and production techniques that produce a feeling of intimacy for the listener (187). While Negus notes that his point is not about authenticity but rather "direct[ing] audiences towards particular interpretations of her songs" (182), I argue that these choices can be read as a desire to connect with her listeners, and articulate shared (often traumatic) experiences, and an attempt to heal both in terms of the personal and the collective. O'Connor considered herself a "keener" or "a person who makes people cry their grief. I cry it for them" (Waters). In the Irish tradition, a keener (In Irish "*Caointeoireacht*" coming from "*caoineadh*" meaning to cry or weep), was someone (usually a woman) who was hired to lament at wakes. While originally it was associated with the supernatural, over time this was replaced by the broader function of emotional release and collective grieving.⁹ O'Connor engaged directly with the tradition, recording keens such as "Paddy's Lament" and "I Am Stretched on Your Grave", but also used sonic elements of the practice in her singing

⁹ It's also worth noting that keening was considered by outsiders to the tradition as "heathenish and unacceptable to Christian society" and was opposed by the Roman Catholic church, which likely influenced its dissociation from the paranormal (McLaughlin 234).

style (McCoy 122-3). Several original songs of hers could also be described as keens in their powerfully raw emotion, articulating not just personal grief or trauma but connecting to something deeper in the Irish psyche.

The keening element of O'Connor's music also gives rise to the "record-making as therapy" idea that often appears in discussions about the singer (Zacharek). It is well known amongst Irish people that the singer had a difficult life, and that her music was a way of coping with it. She suffered horrific abuse at the hands of her mother, was shunned by the Irish people for her criticism of the church and struggled all her life with mental health issues. In music, she revealed her deepest self and used songwriting as a method of confronting her traumas; "Fire on Babylon" is filled with anger toward her mother, "Three Babies" is about three miscarriages the singer suffered, "The Lambs Book of Life" which she described as the story of an "awful period" in her life (*Rememberings* 220). In her biography, she wrote that "every album represents a diary, and each song a chapter in that diary. And my collection of albums represents my healing journey" (200). For O'Connor, music was a crucial part of this journey; and one that was also deeply connected to her spirituality; many of her songs that address her personal struggles use religious imagery and language to do so. Whether this was conscious or unconscious, it highlights the final element of this thread; the use of religious imagery and language in music to grapple with intense emotions and subjects.

As pointed out above, it is important to note how inextricably intertwined each of these threads are, and while I have divided them in a way that I feel is logical, there is significant overlap in each that becomes particularly apparent when looking at my case studies. I also wish to raise a point about the final thread of the personal and the confessional; in O'Connor's case, this does not relate directly to queer experience but rather to personal

trauma, and at times Irish trauma more broadly.¹⁰ As explored in the previous chapter, one's queer identity, particularly in an Irish context can often be a source of anxiety, fear, and indeed trauma, due to fear of religious backlash. Additionally, it has been found that queer people in Ireland are four times more likely to experience severe levels of anxiety, depression and stress. In the context of music then, like O'Connor, queer Irish musicians similarly use religious imagery to explore personal and emotional themes. However, I do find (at least in the case of the musicians in my case studies), that it is often used to explore specifically queer feelings and anxieties, linking it even more closely to the subversive and protesting elements of the second thread. Nonetheless, having outlined these three threads, I turn now to the first of my case studies: Pillow Queens.

An introduction to Pillow Queens

The first time I came across the music of Pillow Queens was on the website formerly known as Twitter. It was November 2019, I was three months into my final year of my undergraduate studies at university, in a failing relationship, and desperately unsure of myself and my identity. It was, in short, a tumultuous time. Elsewhere in Ireland, Pillow Queens had just released a music video for their single "Gay Girls", directed by Kate Dolan, and my Twitter timeline was alive with the buzz of fresh Queer representation - fresh Queer *Irish* representation. I don't remember my first listen to the song, or my first watch of the video. What I do remember, however, is giving a presentation on that exact video in class a couple of months later. I remember singing along to the lyrics with a friend to a live performance in Cork's Cyprus Avenue at a free 2fm gig, and the feeling of belonging that came with that. I

¹⁰ As mentioned previously, Sinéad O'Connor's identity was quite ambiguous, and at times could be categorised as queer. However, having listened to her music and read descriptions of her albums in her biography, I find that she doesn't address any kind of specifically queer anxiety or trauma.

remember writing the essay that went on to inspire this research project. There was something about the band that made me feel seen; their music articulated an experience that resonated deeply with me as a Queer Irish person in a way that I had not experienced with any other.

Unsurprisingly, Pillow Queens had been very much on the scene before my own discovery of them in late 2018. The band formed in 2016, and quickly released their first EP, *Calm Girls*. The band are open about their queerness - the name Pillow Queens is a play on the lesbian term ‘Pillow Princess,’¹¹ and all four members identify as LGBTQ+. The band has gained a strong, predominantly female and queer following, moving from strength to strength in the Irish music scene. Their music, in their own words, deals with “self-loathing, existential crises, and girls girls girls” (Carroll). What stands out however, is the recurring religious allusions in their music. Even a glance through some of their song titles such as “Holy Show”, or “Child of Prague”, not only reference Catholicism, but a specifically Irish branch of the religion.¹² Beyond these light-hearted references however there lies a deeper sense of anxiety associated with the reality of growing up queer in a deeply culturally Catholic and conservative country. Speaking of this feeling, guitarist Sarah Corcoran said:

God, growing up gay was so scary in Ireland. I mean, I know we’re super privileged, like our age group, but still, being Catholic, going to mass every Sunday like, ‘You’re an abomination, you’re intrinsically evil.’ All that kind of language was very much – and still very much is – pretty terrifying (Wakefield)

However, this is not to say that the members haven’t also had positive experiences with the religion. In the same article, Corcoran mentions the “real comfort” she found in prayer from

¹¹ A woman in a lesbian relationship who exclusively receives in sexual acts.

¹² The phrase ‘Holy Show’, incomes from the colloquial phrase “to make a ‘holy show’ of oneself”, meaning to embarrass oneself. The child of Prague references an Irish wedding tradition in which the statue is placed under a bush in one’s garden to ensure good weather for the big day.

an early age. Similarly, Pamela Connelly, the band's frontwoman, spoke about attending mass as a child, despite her family not practising the religion themselves, because she believed that it was "meant to protect you, and [she] liked the idea of it" (Connolly). Moreover, she described the sadness when she "fell out" of her belief in Catholicism, comparing it to "when your imaginary friend goes away...like it was just a nice thing to have, to have this little thing to yourself, and when I was like, "oh that's actually not for me, I don't fit in there", I was like, 'ah, that's a real shame'" (Connolly). As is the case for many of the anonymous participants in this study, for both of them Catholicism was something that eventually had to be divorced from their identity because they were queer; "there's this relationship I used to have with Catholicism and spirituality that I had to break away from, because it didn't accept me anymore" (McEvoy). In their music then, deep religious allegory is juxtaposed against heavy guitars, upbeat melodies and synchronous harmonies, particularly in the almost rapturous choral outro. Their approach could be read as a method of reckoning with the trauma of growing up in a Catholic country, as well as the grief of having to let go of something that once brought comfort due to the realisation that it does not accept you.

Interestingly, there is some contradiction in how the members speak about the religious imagery and language in their music, which perhaps highlights the complexity of the relationship. In one interview, guitarist Sarah Corcoran describes it as "completely accidental", asserting that it's simply a result of Catholic language being "so woven into [their] vernacular and [their] narratives of growing up" (Meagher). On the other hand, however, when speaking to Pamela Connelly (the band's frontwoman and primary songwriter), she was quite clear that it is deliberate:

When it comes to the religious stuff... [it] definitely wasn't unconscious. I really like the imagery of it and using the words to describe something else- like I thought it was

quite interesting to use all these like religious terms and to describe queer love or like queer yearning. I think a lot of people enjoy because they do think it is a critique of the church, which - it is and it isn't, but it's not like that's the aim of the song that if that makes sense(..) all the songs (...) especially the ones with a lot of religious imagery, they're love songs, and we're using these religious images to convey a love, or like to juxtapose it against something that's really queer (Connolly).

The reality is multifaceted, in that it can be simultaneously intentional and not, both conscious and unconscious. As outlined previously, part of the reason why I believe religious language appears in the music of Irish artists is due to its presence in Irish cultural identity more broadly. In Pillow Queens' music, as in Sinéad O'Connor's, I find elements of the three threads detailed above. The use of Catholic symbols which features heavily in much of their music, is deeply rooted in aesthetic choices to use dramatic and powerful imagery, primarily to specifically queer feelings and experiences, and it is this that connects it to both the subversive and the personal. For the purpose of this thesis, I will examine three songs by Pillow Queens and where relevant their accompanying music videos; "Gay Girls", "Liffey", and "Hearts & Minds".

"I won't worry 'bout the gay girls": queer anxiety, the ritual of communion, and the child as an image of liberation.

The first song that I will discuss is also coincidentally the song that introduced me to Pillow Queens; "Gay Girls", which was released in November 2018. Thematically, it deals with feelings of intoxicating lust and repression, which, when coupled with the religious references, capture a sense of anxiety surrounding queer experience. It is both a queer love song, and a defiant anthem of queer existence. Overt religious references appear in both the

lyrics and the video, which Pillow Queens succeed in adopting and subverting in such a way that undermines the oppressive power of these images. As Pamela noted above, it is an example of the band's habit of juxtaposing religion against "something that's really queer". The result then, is a song that articulates the experience of growing up queer in a Catholic country but turns the pain and fear of this into a joyous celebration of queer identity.

As explored in the previous chapter, growing up queer in Ireland lends itself to anxiety: from fear of religious backlash, to grappling with Catholic guilt, to having to reconcile one's Irishness with one's queerness. Lyrically, this anxiety is strongly evident in the song, particularly in the song's chorus which features the line; "I won't worry 'bout the gay girls/I pray for them when I wring my hands". Not only does this contain a direct reference to prayer, and praying specifically for "gay girls", the image of wringing one's hands immediately creates a sense of anxiety regarding queerness. Furthermore, it brings to mind the idea of 'praying the gay away', a common mantra used by conservative Catholics who believe that homosexuality is something that can be 'corrected' through prayer, and highlights the anxiety surrounding queer identities, particularly in religious settings. This is reinforced by the chorus, which features a distinct heavenly calling to the Virgin Mary; "Marie, Marie, Maria/Tell me where to find you when I lose my way", which draws attention to the connected idea of queer people as having 'lost' themselves, and being in need of 'saving' by faith or spirituality which will put them back on the 'right' path. In my interview with Pamela Connelly, Pillow Queen's frontwoman, she acknowledged this anxiety around queerness that was present in her own life from an early age, even before she realised she was queer herself:

I do remember points in which I was just like, concerned for queer people, because I had this (idea) of heaven and hell, and I was like, if you're this way [queer], you don't

go to heaven, you go to hell. So finding out that some TV star or someone that I really liked was (queer, I felt) like, “Oh no, that's such a shame, you're going to hell” (Connolly)

The anxiety evident in the lyrics of “Gay Girls” is contrasted by the upbeat, liberatory feeling of the song, particularly the outro in which these lines are repeated in a chant-like manner. The many voices, layered over each other creates a sound reminiscent in one sense of a church choir, and in another, that of a protest. There is a distinct sense of power and uprising in this section of the song, which reflects the uprising seen in Ireland in recent years against the Catholic Church. The layered voices create an unmistakable sense of revolution, and the coming together of queer people to fight against the otherwise oppressive themes and emotions evident in the song. While the anxiety doesn't ever truly fade in the song, the impact of the lyrics on the listener shifts, creating a feeling of unity and liberation rather than one of oppression and anxiety.

This anxiety/liberatory duality is also explored in the song's music video. Directed by Kat Dolan, it follows a young girl who runs away from home on her first communion day, abandoning the religious rite of passage in favour of a day spent gallivanting with three other girls who have similarly ignored the expected sacrament. While as detailed in chapter two, the church in Ireland has lost a significant amount of power in recent years, the Catholic *habitus* means that the majority of Irish children continue to engage in religious sacraments including baptism, first communion and confirmation. A recent study conducted by Dr. Karl Kitching explores the changing nature of the first Communion ritual. The study, which focused on four school communities in Ireland, found that in spite of changes surrounding the religious importance of making one's Communion, the tradition “remains significant as a gendered benchmark that makes being Catholic at this time ‘the norm’ for boys and girls”

(45). It is one of the first markers of cultural Catholic life, but also the first time Irish children really begin to be introduced to Catholic doctrine. In Ireland, children typically make their communion around the age of seven or eight. The reason for this is that the church considers this point as “the age of reason”, or the age at which humans become “morally responsible” and can differentiate right from wrong (Sachs). In spite of the loosening grip of the moral power of the Catholic church in Ireland, partaking in a religious sacrament (which includes the first confession) at the age when one’s moral compass is just beginning to form would no doubt have an impact on what a child would consider ‘good’ versus ‘bad’.

In the video then, the girls’ choice to reject the sacrament is a powerful statement. In the place of indoctrination there is play, as the girls perform the communion ritual with flying saucer sweets, spray one another with fizzy drinks and roll down hills together. As they do so, their white communion dresses become increasingly soaked and stained. Another strong religious symbol, the white dress is worn only by girls making their Communion. The garments highlight the gender expectations reinforced by traditional Catholicism whereby girls and women are expected to adhere to traditional ideas of femininity, while also remaining also ‘pure’ and ‘clean’, while their male counterparts are not held to this same standard. As the video progresses then, the religious connotations associated with them seem to fade away. In its place, they become a symbol of youth and childhood, as well as the girls’ comradery and the unifying power in their femininity.

Throughout the video, the child increasingly becomes a symbol of freedom. Where Sinéad O’Connor uses the image of the abused child to represent the Irish people, Pillow Queens use the opposing liberatory image of the girl escaping from the bonds of Catholic oppression and getting to enjoy the wonder and awe of being a child. In the words of the video’s director, Kat Dolan.

The four communion gals are representative of the New Ireland. We were once totally dominated by an authoritarian Catholic leadership, and now those shackles are starting to fall away. For many years women and LGBT people were deeply oppressed. The song ‘Gay Girls’ is a joyous anthem for us, and like the kids in the video it’s about time we were all carefree and found joy in the simple things like bottles of Red Lemonade flavour Cadet.” (Banks)

The girls could also be read as a manifestation of the inner child, and even as reflective of the members finding comfort in religion as children, and a desire to return to that innocent, untroubled approach to Catholicism. The child here is not only a liberatory but also a subversive image, used here to redefine the oppressive nature of the Catholic symbols in the video, and an example of Pillow Queens “operat[ing] within persistently repressive discourses to create liberatory musical images” (McClary 149).

“I wanna take you with me, to wash and dry your feet”: Mythology, rapture, and religious cynicism.

The fifth song on *In Waiting*, “Liffey” (which also happens to be my personal favourite), also features deeply religious themes and images. The title, taking its name from the river that runs through Dublin city centre, situates the song firmly in the heart of the city, reinforced by the song’s powerful refrain: “Oh spread me over the Liffey / and sing me off to sleep” (1.47-2.06). Aurally, the song is dense and deeply reminiscent of Irish traditional music, particularly *Sean-nós*, and like the music of Sinéad, shares many aural features of the lament or *keen*. Pamela Connolly’s distinctive voice has often been compared to that of Dolores O’Riordan, another Irish singer who drew inspiration from *Sean-nós*. Like O’Riordan and O’Connor, Connolly sings in her native accent, and makes use of similar harsh nasal

tones, the glottal stop and cry break for dramatic effect (McCoy 218). As in the case of O'Connor, these vocal techniques create intimacy for the listener, while also adding to the recognisably Irish quality of the song. Furthermore, continuing to read the voice as a space where the social, cultural and political interact, and moreover the specifically *queer* voice as a space for subversion, the choice by Pamela to use elements of traditional Irish song is one that challenges normative notions of Irishness.

Thematically, the song is densely theologically charged, with an interweaving of mythology with religion. Pillow Queens have described the song as “very apocalyptic and full of impending doom to oneself and the world around them” (Track-by-track). Again, there are similarities with the *keens* in its connection to death and the supernatural. Furthermore, Orlaith Darling draws a connection between the song and the “eponymous goddess”, Anallia, the personification of the river Liffey that appears in James Joyce’s 1939 novel *Finnegan’s Wake* (234). In the novel, Anna Livia Plurabelle is not a traditional character in the sense of a linear narrative but rather a symbolic and multifaceted representation. Similarly, the song is not linear in structure; “Liffey” starts at the end of the album’s previous song; “HowDoILook”, with bare vocals forming slightly dissonant harmonies that lead into the drone. The drone itself both begins and ends the song, forming a loop that creates a sense of continuity, a cyclical flow that mimics that of the river itself. Darling also makes the astute observation that “the all-encompassing soundscape also feels liquid and soothing, an intimacy which is reinforced by traditional musical features: the glottal stops, sean nós vocal style, grace notes, and repeated final notes of the main refrain anchor the song within a wider lineage of recognizably Irish music” (234). The use of this kind of interfaith dialogue is emblematic of the Irish relationship with spirituality; an interweaving of superstition and religion that is inherently subversive in a religion wherein superstition is considered a sin against the first commandment (Kreeft 208).

The aforementioned quote also highlights the theme of rapture in the song. This is reflected by the song's key signature, which is c sharp minor. While the interpretation of key signatures is quite subjective, Steblin's *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* provides some useful associations with the key, primarily the feeling of despair. In more extreme examples, Schrader describes the key as an expression of "a depraved, insane mind", while Herloßsohn notes that it is "very suitable for the expression of laments" (qtd. In Steblin 237-8). In any case, the quality of the chosen key signature seems to evoke feelings of hopelessness and desperation which once again connect it to thematic features of the keen.

The instrumentation in this key then creates the sense of overwhelm, adds to the rapturous elements of the song. The drone heard in the opening is quickly drowned out by heavy guitar and a processional drum beat that pushes the melody forward while creating a sense of something impending, reminiscent of a funeral march. Pamela Connolley's voice cuts through the noise like a preacher's in her distinct Dublin accent. The reverberation on her vocals add to the sense of vastness in the song, combined with dissonant harmonies that create a sense of anxiety and foreboding. The lyrics, while referencing religion, present a deeply cynical point of view that at times could be read as quite dismissive of the canon of Catholic faith, for example in the lines; "God give me glory, or don't / 'll take my lot". Once again this sense of hopelessness and apathy is felt in the song's biting refrain: 'Someday you'll have my head, / you'll have my head on a silver plate', which calls to mind the biblical story of John the Baptist, who was beheaded by Herod at the request of his step-daughter Salome, to whom the head was presented on a silver platter (*Bible* Matt. 14.1-12).

Other biblical images appear throughout the song, including several references to feet. The first appears at the end of the first verse, in the lines "another chance to / find your feet /

or cut them off”, which is reminiscent of a phrase in the book of Mark; “and if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off” (*Bible*, Mark 9.45). While both sentiments are dramatic (as is much of the imagery in the song), Pillow Queens have twisted the biblical sentiment into one that reflects the emotional distress evident in the song while retaining that same sense of apathy and despair. Another example is that which appears in the chorus; “I wanna take you with me / to wash and dry your feet”. Used here, it is a clear reference to the religious rite evident in many parts of the Bible. Washing feet is a significant cultural and symbolic practice, the most well-known account of which in the Bible appears in the New Testament in the Gospel of John when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples during The Last Supper (*Bible* John 13.1-5). In this context, the act is one of profound love and humility. Used by Pillow Queens then, it reinforces the use of religious imagery to describe queer love. Moreover, within Catholic doctrine the earthly body is considered sinful, and given the church’s stance on homosexuality, the queer body even more so. However, in this context the queer body is something to be worshipped. Yet again, Pillow Queens demonstrate their subversion of religious language by using it to describe queer love.

“You came to worship but the godless kind”: Patriarchy, Ann Lovett, and escaping from the shackles of religious oppression.

While their debut album is littered with Catholic language and imagery, Pillow Queen’s second album, *Leave the Light On*, contains significantly fewer religious references (although it does contain many allusions to marriage and weddings, which I will discuss in the next chapter). The third song to appear on the album “Hearts & Minds” contains the most lyrical religious references, however, unlike many of their more allegory-rich tracks, it isn’t a love song. Speaking about the song in an interview, Connolly explained:

Hearts & Minds is about experiencing the feeling of being a teenager again. The insecurities about body image and ability when it comes to being a musician that's seeing themselves recorded and pictured, as well as commented on. It deals with the idea of imposter syndrome when it comes to an industry that favours the male form and the insecurity of not being able to be effortless with your movements (Banks, italics in original).

Thematically, the song deals more with insecurity and patriarchy than explicitly Catholic or religious ideas, however lyrical references to the religion are scattered throughout the song. Given that the Catholic church has historically been the primary upholder of patriarchal values in Ireland, it makes sense that these references appear in a song with such themes.

The most obvious lyrical example of this appears in the song's refrain; "No more novenas, / You came to worship, but the godless kind" (0.42-0.50). While in the song the choice to refer to a novena was likely more for alliteration than to condemn that specific Catholic practice, the result is not only rejection of religious rites or prayer, but also a suggestion of the performative aspect of such rituals. The latter phrase, "you came to worship but the godless kind" suggests a kind of paradoxical, or hypocritical act, in which the addressee, who is worshipping, is doing so out of self-interest. Given the context of the song as noted above, it could be read as a critique of the superficiality of both fame and the burden of gender performance for women. These lines also demonstrate a similar religious cynicism as seen in "Liffey", again highlighting the band's tendency towards subtly subverting religious language.

The video for "Hearts & Minds", directed by Greg Purcell & Georgia Kelly, exemplifies the religious references evident in the lyrics, taking the statement of the song a step further. The video opens with Pillow Queens playing in a large room that could just as

easily be a convent as a crumbling art gallery. Strewn across the floor are pages seemingly ripped out of books, the covers of which are connected by a red ribbon. Unidentifiable portraits loom behind them. The space feels dark and oppressive, laden with history; it is 12 Henrietta Street in North County Dublin. Built in the early 18th century for the Irish aristocracy, the houses of Henrietta Street have seen centuries of Irish social and cultural change. More interesting still, one of the neighbouring houses, number 15 was briefly home to Mary Wollstonecraft, who worked as a governess for the Kingsborough family.

¹³Wollstonecraft, who shortly afterwards abandoned the profession to pursue writing (an uncommon career for women at the time), was unimpressed with the oppressive social rules that she felt the women of Henrietta Street were subject to:

Dublin has not the advantages which result from residing in London; everyone's conduct is canvassed, and the least deviation from a ridiculous rule of propriety... would endanger their precarious existence (qtd. in Robinson)

While Connolly admitted that the choice to film the video in the house had more to do with the ambiance of the building fitting their desired aesthetic than anything else, its history simply adds to its impact in the video (Connolly).

In addition to the members of Pillow Queens, the video stars theatre actress Venetia Bowe. The first time Venetia is seen, sixteen seconds into the video, she lies on the floor of a dark hallway, wearing a white dress. Red ribbons are tied around her ankles and wrists like shackles and billow out from her body like streams of blood. These same ribbons pull at her throughout the video, controlling her movements as she struggles to break free. The imagery is strongly evocative; her white dress echoes the communion or wedding dress, as in the

¹³ Ten years later, one of the girls she had governed ran off with her own uncle, and a furious Lord Kingsborough murdered him. Although Wollstonecraft had died by then, the influence of her radical feminist teachings was widely blamed (Wood).

video for “Gay Girls”. Similarly, it holds the same representations of virginal purity, while also giving her the appearance of a kind of ghostly figure. Connolly described her interpretation of the character: “To me, that girl represented someone who feels too seen all the time. And it's real self-conscious, it feels kind of like giving away bits of yourself” (Connolly).

Indeed, her character is not only watched by some omniscient presences, but also manipulated by them. At 0.44 disembodied hands grasp at her face, brandishing lipsticks and makeup brushes while she struggles to escape. This is a clear reference to the pressures of femininity and beauty standards, not just within the music industry but also in Irish cultural life in general, especially when considered with the religious images that flash throughout the video. Many of these images are close-up shots of religious icons that hang on the walls of the house. Scattered between clips of the protagonist struggling against the bonds that manipulate her are paintings of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, or a sacred heart lamp, which was staple in many Irish homes, particularly in the mid-20th century, often found alongside portraits of John F. Kennedy, statues of the Child of Prague, and a portrait of the pope (de Brit). In the context of the video, they highlight a specific time in Ireland, how deeply embedded Catholicism has been in Irish history, and in the oppression of women in this country.

Other images appear however that are not inside the building itself. At 2.06, flashes of a grotto to the Virgin Mary, reminiscent of the place where 15-year-old Ann Lovett died giving birth in 1984, just four months after a divisive referendum on abortion rights in Ireland that inserted the 8th amendment into the Irish constitution. The amendment, which gave equal right to life to the unborn and pregnant women, restricted abortion access in Ireland until it was repealed in 2018. During the 2018 campaign, Ann Lovett’s story resurfaced, and

for the first time her boyfriend Richard “Ricky” McDonnell spoke publicly about her death, in an interview published in the Irish Times in the lead up to the referendum. In the article, McDonnell describes the church’s interference in the aftermath of Ann Lovett’s death, and their attempts to deflect any responsibility on their part. In the same interview, he asserts that he also believes that her death was a deliberate protest against both the church and Irish society at the time (Bol). While the image of the grotto may simply be a typically Irish religious image along with the sacred heart lamp, since the referendum, it will always make me think of Ann Lovett, and its use here offers a stark reminder of the dark history of Catholic conservatism in Ireland.

Another powerful image appears for a brief moment at 2.14 of the Papal cross that stands in Phoenix Park, Dublin. The cross, 35 metres in height, looms over a deserted park against a backdrop of grey skies. As with much of the imagery in this video, it is a bleak spectacle. The cross itself was erected for the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979. It was at this structure that the then-Pope preached to 1.25 million attendants (Ó Corráin 479). By contrast, when Pope Francis stood in the same place during his visit in 2018, the congregation was made up of just 130,000 (McDermott). The image points toward the loosening grip of Catholic monopoly on Irish morality. Used in the video it is a strong statement about the power of collective change, highlighting an emerging reality that once seemed unthinkable - an Ireland no longer under the thumb of the Catholic church. Further to this, it can be read as a kind of reckoning that looms on the horizon regarding this shift in power. Read with the feminist themes of the song, there is a sense that more change is coming in terms of the place of those identities that have historically been oppressed.

The video finally culminates at 3.05 as the song reaches its climax. Bowe dunks her head in a bucket of water, an act which is akin to the Catholic sacrament of baptism. In this

case however, it is a kind of self-baptism, which enables the protagonist to break free from the shackles that have been constraining and restricting her. The spaces previously occupied by the members of Pillow Queens are seen again, now empty. Our protagonist rips the red ribbon from her wrists and bursts through a door where she pauses, breathing heavily, before the video cuts to black. The ending is deliberately ambiguous; it remains unknown to the viewer whether or not she has actually managed to escape, or if she is doomed to remain in the house, controlled and manipulated for eternity. Similarly, I am left wondering if Ireland has truly escaped its past – or indeed if it ever will.

Chapter 4: “A whole new space to roam”: identity, representation, and the musical imagining of a queer Irish utopia

On the 26th of July 2023, it was announced that Shuhada' Sadaqat / Sinéad O'Connor had died at just 56 years old. The news shook Ireland. Social media erupted with tributes to the singer, vigils were held across Dublin and London in her memory. At the Irish Music Wall of Fame in Temple Bar, her picture stood with a sign that poignantly read “Thank you Sinéad / We heard you” (Lee). Although the loss was felt by the people of Ireland as a whole, most notable perhaps was the impact on the Irish queer community. As Irish LGBTQ+ activist Toryn Glavin wrote in a tweet; “Every Irish queer, woman and outcast is surely feeling Sinéad’s passing tonight” (Toryn Catriona Glavin). Indeed, the singer had such a strong connection to the Irish queer community, not only in her activism for the community, but also in her status as an outsider. Regardless of her own identity, O'Connor seemed to occupy a space that made her deeply relatable to Irish queer people. Responding to the above tweet, another twitter user noted:

I saw her in Hammersmith in 2019. The audience where I was standing was largely made up of older queer women, many probably left Ireland in the '80s because of prejudice, you could tell how much Sinéad meant to them (@Shane_OD).

Similarly, when asked in an interview why she thought lesbians were so drawn to her and her music, she responded, “I think they see themselves in me” (qtd. in Mayhew 170). In the previous chapter, I touched on the idea that personal and therapeutic aspects of O'Connor's music create relatability for the outcasted Irish audience. Moreover, her own status as an outsider added to this. In some cases, she may even have occupied a kind of spiritual or priest-like position. In “Sinéad O'Connor: Priesthood of the Excluded”, Tatiana Kalveks posits that sharing experiences of exclusion within a community fosters a radical inclusivity

towards the unfamiliar other, often challenging institutional domination. The othering of O'Connor as well as her exclusion from mainstream Irish acceptance has made her a figure of relatability for Irish queer people, which the church's condemnation of her only adds to as an individual who is "theologically charged yet unorthodox, oriented toward interfaith dialogue and those on the margins" (Kalveks 178). As outlined previously, her approach to music was deeply connected to her spiritual identity, and this was something she attempted to convey in her musical performance; "when I go onstage, I always pray that I can be a priest and that when I leave, people will feel like they've been at church" (*Rememberings* 219).

Once again, Sinéad O'Connor lies at the intersection of what this chapter will discuss. Firstly, I will explore the role of music in fostering queer communities and hence the impact of music being made by queer Irish musicians on queer Irish listeners, drawing from personal experience, as well as the experiences detailed in interviews with other queer Irish people. From this, I argue that queer people are drawn to music that expresses the difference that they find in themselves, whether lyrically, sonically, or otherwise. Secondly, I will explore the intersection between music spaces and spiritual spaces in an Irish context, again drawing from participant interviews to argue that for Irish people, music has begun to occupy a religious space, especially when considered with the secularisation of Ireland. I return to my primary case study, Pillow Queens, with a final analysis of one of their songs, "Handsome Wife" to explore how the (queer) mundane is deified in their music. I will also discuss my secondary case study, Orla Gartland, queer representations in her music, following Cusick's "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music", and Nadine Hubb's queer reading of "Jolene" to examine how queer listeners find themselves in her music. Finally, I will examine the idea of queer utopias, inspired by the work of José Esteban Muñoz on queer futurity to argue that queer Irish musicians are participating in the imagining of a kind of quasi-religious utopia through music. As Muñoz points out, queer aesthetics (and in this case, music) "frequently

contain blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity” (1). I argue that this, coupled with the secularisation of Ireland and the associated religification of music create imaginings of a queer Irish utopia in which queer identities are accepted and celebrated.

Music, identity and belonging: expressions of queer difference

Sometime last year, I was out with some friends when the topic of queerness and specific music styles came up in conversation. It was shortly after the release of 2022’s Spotify wrapped, and a (cisgender heterosexual) friend of a friend proudly asserted that based on his top listened to artists that year, he had a “lesbian music taste”. While I could delve into the (questionable at best and heterosexist at worst) intentions behind this statement, instead I mention it here as an opening to the discussion on music and queer identity. The suggestion that sexuality is linked to modes of expression, including (but not limited to) music, is not new, nor is the implication that As Taylor writes:

There is a general understanding (be it a commodified and homogenous one) that “lesbian music” is female singer-songwriter music, while “gay music” generally equates to some category of dance music such as house, disco or pop. Such musico-sexual affiliations are (more often than not) gross generalisations purported by marketing strategists who are targeting the pink dollar in an attempt to package and sell lesbian and gay cultural identity to mainstream sensibilities (Taylor *Spewing* 222)

While the man in question was likely making this statement rooted in such stereotypes (the top artists he showed me were in fact, female singer-songwriters) and his smugness at the announcement probably came from the sense that this music taste potentially gave him some kind of insider status in the lesbian community, it is worth examining the role of music in the

construction of queer identities and sensibilities. This is not to suggest that stereotypes like those mentioned above have any real weight, but rather that such stereotypes are indicative of queer relationships and interactions with music, something that a man claiming to have a “lesbian music taste” cannot ever truly access. I believe that queer people are in fact more drawn to musical expressions of *difference*, whether that be musical difference because we more easily find ourselves in musical discourses that exist on the margins.

There is a wealth of discourse about the role of music in the construction of personal and collective identity across a wide range of contexts. Following Tia DeNora’s assertion that “music may serve (..) as a model of self, a resource for articulating and stabilizing self-identity” (158), I regard music as a significant tool for queer self-identification and community formation. Christopher Small’s seminal work *Musicking* also provides a useful framework for thinking about music’s role in the formation of community and identity, choosing to consider music not as a thing but rather an act that fosters a series of interactions between parties who engage in it:

The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part,... and they stand as metaphor for ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world (13).

In other words, music is consistently concerned with relationships, and it functions as a means of exploration, affirmation, and celebration of those relationships. In the context of the

queer community, music has unsurprisingly played a large role in asserting our identities, claiming spaces and finding community, and this is well-documented, particularly in the context of gay men. Whether it's in ball culture, drag, diva worship, queer club spaces, or simply in the music being made by other queer people, music and its associated spaces contribute to the construction of queer identities, both on a personal and a collective level. Music is "a social force that constructs heteronormativity and resistant queer sexualities" (Whiteley and Rycenga xiii, emphasis in original) and Jodie Taylor, who elaborates that "music does not merely reflect gendered and sexual realities, but contributes to the production of gender and sexual subjectivities" (*Playing* 8). This is particularly apt when one considers music as a space for the not only the construction, but also the performance of queer gender and sexuality. As Taylor writes, "music is well suited to socially and morally ambiguous displays of gender [and] sexuality" (*Queer Temporalities* 898). Through music, queer sensibilities are constructed on the collective level, and the queer self on the personal level.

While the scholars referenced above inform much of the critical approach to the ideas presented here, in order to demonstrate the impact of music in the formation of a particular collective sense of identity or community, I find it most useful to return to the primary source in this discussion. That is, the people who engage with the community through music, their lived experiences and insights, in order to explore the role of music in fostering specifically queer identity and community in an Irish context. In my own experience, music played a fundamental role in the formation firstly of my identity, and later my queer identity. From an early age I was sent to piano lessons, and then voice lessons; both of which contributed to the feeling that music, and playing music were intrinsic to who I was. It was something I partook in both alone and in group settings, an activity that I enjoyed, and one that I felt good at. This is significant; I was terrible at sports as a child, and as a child you are forced into a lot of

situations in which you must actively partake in team sports (see the Irish obsession with G.A.A. detailed in chapter two). This led to quite a bit of social ostracisation throughout school, which furthered my association between music and my identity, given that it was a realm which brought me comfort, and through which I could connect with others who were like me. As a young teenager then, I began to explore and develop my music taste, albeit not well. It was around this time that I discovered alternative rock, emo, and pop-punk and naturally, made it my entire personality. The fact that it was 2010 and that kind of music, although relatively popular, was generally considered ‘alternative’, appealed to me. I was decidedly ‘not like other girls’ my age, and music was a way of expressing that. While the phrase still makes me cringe, I see the value in it, particularly considering my queerness now. My feeling of difference or otherness was not only reflected in the music I listened to but reinforced by it. It became an important facet of my daily life - like many teenagers, I found comfort in music when I was distressed and formed pivotal friendships with those I connected with through music (many of whom also came out as queer later in life). Later, I went on to study music, deepening further still its entrenchment in my identity and sense of self. It was around this time that I was also starting to become more comfortable in my queer identity and started going to queer bars and clubs. In these spaces, I not only met other queer people, but also engaged in music through dance and drag performance. The music in these spaces was more enjoyable than in other spaces I had been to, and I felt more comfortable there surrounded by fellow queers. Jodie Taylor writes that “music is essential to the collective social expression of sexual difference” (Taylor *Playing* 176). Music has been essential to my expression of my own perceived difference, even before I realised that my difference was queer.

Returning to the idea of a ‘gay music taste’ then, it makes sense that this would have been around the time that my own preference for queer music developed. Although I actively

sought out queer media in some ways, particularly through TV and film, I don't recall intentionally seeking queer music. Still, much of the music that I listen to happens to be made by queer artists. Similarly, I asked the participants in interviews if they listened to predominantly queer artists, and while most of them did, all were hesitant to suggest that this was due to a deliberate or conscious choice. One participant described it as a "chicken and egg" situation, in that it is virtually impossible to determine whether certain music is more appealing by virtue of being queer, or if it is a product of social contagion of sorts, where queer people are being introduced to new music by other queer people or in queer spaces, resulting in similar listening habits and preferences. Another interviewee simply shrugged and said, "I just kind of veered toward what I wanted to see" (anonymous).

There are of course a number of potential reasons for this semi-conscious bias towards queer musicians. One idea that appeared was that lack of identification with 'straight' music, or music made by straight artists:

That kind of yearning or that, you know, there's like a pining missing from a lot of, uh, straight, or like cis straight music that I can't-I feel like it's not that it's lacking depth, but it's lacking a depth that I can relate to (anonymous).

This is relatively unsurprising: as Taylor reminds us, "the articulation of sexual desire in contemporary popular music idioms has largely been the domain of heterosexuals" (*Spewing* 221). Moreover, the articulation of *romantic* desire is similarly homonormative, with mainstream pop music centring heterosexual narratives of love and relationships.

Unsurprisingly then, there was a tendency (particularly among the queer women that I interviewed) to lean towards more alternative music styles, and away from the mainstream pop music that dominates, not only for difference in content, but also for sonic differences. One participant hypothesised an interesting reason for this:

I love jazz-influenced and kind of more odd[ly] influenced music. I think some marginalised groups are willing to look into these odd places for inspiration, whereas if you love Britney Spears your whole life and all this mainstream pop music, and you've always related to it, you don't feel the need to look somewhere else (anonymous).

As was the case for me, it seems that queer people are often drawn towards music that expresses difference, whether that be lyrically or sonically, to connect with the sense of otherness they may feel in their everyday life. It seems that listening to artists who are queer produces feelings of relatability, or feeling 'seen' by an artist's music, even when the music itself doesn't explicitly deal with queer themes. One participant described such a feeling regarding Ethel Cain, an American singer-songwriter whose music deals with themes of "religious indoctrination, sexual violence, isolation, and family trauma" (Lopez):

I think the best example of [an artist that I relate to] would be Ethel Cain. I remember I discovered her maybe about a year ago and genuinely it's been one of the few times I've felt really seen [by music] but her music is amazing and she's queer, and even though her music isn't specifically related to being queer, I just felt a sense of feeling seen in her lyrics (anonymous).

While music has long been hailed as "the universal language of mankind" (Wadsworth Longfellow 4), given the tendency towards expression of difference in queer music it makes sense that queer listeners would relate more to, and find themselves more in the music of queer musicians. Moreover, the fact that the music industry has historically been dominated by heterosexual narratives only adds to the significance of finding queer representation in music. As Pillow Queens' drummer Rachel Lyons put it in an interview, "If I could rewind 10 years, and if I saw a band like us on stage, I would be obsessed" (Mullally).

Similarly, then, queer music can also offer an important sense of connection to other listeners of the same artist. As one participant put it:

If you like a type of music and you're drawn to it, you know you're likely to kind of connect with the people who also like that kind of music or that song. So when you're all dancing together at [a concert], you kind of feel a sense of safety.

Another participant described the anticipation of going to their first concert by a queer musician, and the subsequent feeling of belonging that came from the experience:

It was like “I’m gonna be in a room full of people just like me” and that’s when the kind of social anxiety, the peer pressure [started because] I want[ed] to look pretty because [I wanted] to find that someone that was really cool, you know. It was just the start of something new. When the music was playing, the whole room was kind of moving with it and I just remember thinking “I wanna be a part of this”. I fit into very many social situations and the queer ones are the ones that make me feel alive, you know?” (anonymous)

Both of these quotes highlight not only the sense of connection to the artist and their music, but also the sense of belonging that emerged in relation to the collective experience of music particularly in live music settings. In continuing to consider music as something that people do, that establishes significant relationships that give music its meaning, music becomes one of the spaces for queer people to not only find one another, but find a sense of belonging to something larger than yourself:

When you’re part of a mass gathering or some big thing where you are just one insignificant person in the masses but that’s what makes it so amazing because you’re all one. And a concert I think is the perfect example of that (anonymous).

For queer people, this sense of belonging can be more crucial than others, given the tendency for us to be ostracised, shunned, or even forced out of communities. As Irish DJ Elaine Mai puts it:

Home is where you're from and where you live, but it's so much more than that, especially from a queer person's perspective. Home is like a club where your chosen family are. There's a track on the album called "Mother", and that is literally about the club, the feeling when you're there. The different ways of experiencing the feeling of belonging is an interesting theme for me. I think that sense of wanting to belong is for everyone, wherever they may be or with whatever group of people, but I definitely think it's important for queer people (Clayton-Lea).

Music spaces as spiritual spaces

Another interesting point that came from interviews was people's experience with music in religious contexts. The majority of the participants were themselves musicians and reported playing music at mass or in churches growing up. For many Irish people, myself included, playing an instrument or singing at mass or in a church choir is the first experience of performing music in front of other people. For some then, this has had an impact on the way they interact with music, even in secular settings. As one participant noted: "[Growing up playing in the church] means that anytime I perform I always feel a little undercurrent - It's like- music is my faith" (anonymous). Moreover, I found it particular interesting that many interviewees used religious language and phrases to describe music experiences, with terms such as "spiritual", "out-of-body experience" or "transcending" appear often, and one participant even describing dancing with others as "communion".

The idea that music spaces, and in particular live music spaces act as some kind of spiritual or sacred environment is not new. In his book, *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music*, Rupert Till argues that music has replaced traditional spaces of worship in contemporary society. Indeed, music seems to share many of the defining characteristics of religion: musicians can be read as icons or figureheads, moral lessons appear often in song lyrics, as highlighted above, community is an important facet of musical engagement. While his argument does at times put him in danger of recreating the artists-as-priests idea of the enlightenment, it raises an interesting point, especially when considered in the context of Ireland, which has historically been so reliant on religion for a sense of communal identity. As Eurich writes:

Making everyday life somehow transcendent shows ways of experience which traditionally have been placed in the field of religion. So it can be described as a pseudo-religious experience which is mediated by music (60).

Dance music in particular has long been associated with transcendental or spiritual experiences, not least because of the associated use of euphoria-inducing recreational drugs in these situations, as well as the repetitive, trance-like element of the music. Moreover, the genre is often also associated with the queer community due to its roots in disco, popularity in queer music spaces, and its association with queer men. John Gill writes that “the dancefloor has always been a holy space ... but it is particularly so among men and women attracted to their own sex” (134). Moreover, he argues that queer experiences of disco can at times transcend ordinary life, and reach a kind of religious experience; ‘the one form of music which . . . is bound up in something that closely resembles Roland Barthes’s notion of *jouissance*, that is, rapture, bliss, or transcendence’ (Gill 134).

In my experience, this is not limited to disco or dance spaces, but is a feeling that can emerge in many music settings. It is a feeling I have had at concerts, while performing, when listening to music in a group setting, or even while alone. Several participants spoke of similar experiences:

I think [when] listening to certain songs or going to certain music events, there can be moments like ‘this is what it's all for, this is what’s amazing about life, this is what gives me hope and faith in humanity’, so I do think it fills that void. Where some people go to church and seek that meaning there, we can now look to songs ... a song is like a prayer really in some ways, depending on what or how you pray (anonymous)

When I saw [them] live, that was probably one of those moments where I was completely at the same level as everybody around me, and like this is... like a kind of half out-of-body feeling (anonymous)

Additionally, Pamela Connolly gave an interesting insight into not only being involved in, but also facilitating this kind of experience as a performer:

I think the first time ever, I felt that kind of really overwhelming feeling of something bigger than myself when I was watching a performance was, I went to go see Sufjan Stevens in the Olympia. I don't know if it was the first time I'd ever felt it, but like, I was completely overwhelmed but in a good way, and I just wanted to burst out crying and I was just like, “wow, this is insane”. I get that I get a similar feeling when you know, at the end of our set when everybody is singing, “Liffey” and it's really overwhelming and like, that's the point where I take like I have ear monitor in and I just like I take them out like I don't care if I can't hear myself, but I need to be able to hear this crowd and I get [that feeling] as well (Connolly).

I do believe that Irish queer people (and perhaps Irish people in general) may have a greater tendency to connect this with spiritual experience given our historical attachment to religion in the formation of identity. Moreover, considering Ostwalt's assertion of secularisation as a bidirectional process, it follows that as Ireland has become more secular, the mundane has become religious, as the boundaries between these experiences becomes ever more blurred. As Eurich writes, "making everyday life somehow transcendent shows ways of experience which traditionally have been placed in the field of religion. So it can be described as a pseudo-religious experience which is mediated by music" (67).

Furthermore, these moments of transcendence can be read not only as spiritual, but also as utopian. Writing about theatre, Jill Dolan examines "small but profound moments in which the performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present". She calls these moments "utopian performatives [that] make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better" (5-6). In experiencing these instants through music, queer people achieve moments of liberation, feeling "one" with those around them, and part of something "bigger" than themselves. I now examine some of the ways in which this plays out in the music of queer Irish musicians, returning first to primary case study, Pillow Queens.

"I may not be the wife you want but I'm pregnant with the virgin tongue": queer joy, same-sex marriage semantics, and chosen family.

"Handsome Wife" which appears on the band's first album, can be read as a manifestation of the ideas outlined above. It is a joyous queer anthem, in which the mundane is elevated to religious or spiritual standing, while remaining deeply resonant for the Irish queer listener. The title alone is oxymoronic, in its deliberate play on gendered terms;

“handsome”, a typically masculine-associated compliment juxtaposed with the typically feminine “wife”, creating this articulation of queer difference for people who do not fit into cisgendered or heteronormative roles in their relationships, or indeed in their lives. The song is one of the band's most uplifting tracks and could be described as unbridled queer joy. It features an upbeat 4/4 rhythm, catchy guitar riffs and a sing-along-able chorus. The lyrics are as positive as they are poetic, with images of “sitting sweet in the passenger seat” before “going home and growing strong / The silence is so soft / I'm gonna be free” (1.02-1.15). It's an homage to community, love, and finding beauty in the small things in life:

Throughout, the mundane but tender moments are held up and deified, paying reverence to the ease in which a love can thrive outside the realms of tradition. The song continuously references structures and rituals that were once out of reach, but are now within our grasp. In spite of this, “Handsome Wife” affirms that they pale in comparison to the communities we've built ourselves (qtd. In Maloney).

Interesting perhaps is the consistent use of the term “wife” throughout not only this particular song, but both of Pillow Queens' albums, despite none of the members being married themselves. In my experience this is a relatively common phenomenon for queer women; I sometimes (only partially in jest) refer to my partner as my wife, as do some other unmarried women-loving-women couples that we know. However, for many it is much more complex. In *Same-Sex Marriage, Context, and Lesbian Identity*, Whitlow and Ould highlight some reasons for avoiding the term, for example, not wanting to reveal one's identity in certain settings, or simply due to its heteronormative associations. Through interviews with twenty same-sex couples and surveys on over two hundred others, they found that although those born after 1962 had more positive associations with the label, the majority took some issue with the word (15). The matter is not exclusively terminology based; they found that for

some, even the idea of same-sex marriage is perceived as a loss in gay and lesbian culture (48). Judith Butler has also argued that achieving same-sex marriage may actually strengthen hierarchies around queer lives, creating a norm by which the other (i.e. non-married queer couples) may be delegitimised (18). These are valid concerns; the institution of marriage is deeply heteronormative, and it is understandable that by virtue of being queer, engaging with it can feel like a sort of self-betrayal. Returning to *Pillow Queens* then, what does it mean then when a *non-married* queer woman uses the word “wife” in a song? And what impact does that have for queer audiences?

While at least part of the reason is poetic licence (“handsome wife” has a much better ring to it than “handsome girlfriend” or “handsome partner”), Connolly noted that it can “convey the heaviness and the importance of this as a very significant relationship without having to say much at all” (source). Indeed, “wife” is a far more evocative word. It’s more commonly associated with long-term commitment and love, than labels such as “girlfriend” which can feel juvenile, or “partner” which can feel formal (or at times even clinical). In the realm of songwriting, it conveys the intensity and importance of a relationship without becoming caught up in the semantic issues that other terms can present. It also references a specific trope around queer experience, and in particular queer female experience. Queer women are notoriously quick to form intense romantic relationships, such that a whole index of stereotypes and in-jokes have formed in the community, about week-long first dates or getting cats and moving in together after a month. Used here, “wife” feels like a nod to this trope, an acknowledgement of queer experience that resonates more deeply with queer listeners than with their heterosexual counterparts.

Another reason for its use in songwriting is the wealth of imagery it offers. In an Irish context, the term “wife” is unsurprisingly bound up with Catholicism and the Irish image of marriage. As Pamela Connolly described:

When I think of [wedding] imagery, I think of very heteronormative imagery and like a real binding of- like it's like a contract, like a real contract in religious terms, but yeah, and you know, when you're growing up, when you think of marriage, you think of it in a church, you know, like the white dress and the veil ... the imagery is dramatic, it's beautiful. It's dark, but it's like it's really useful as a writer, and it's also like kind of just ingrained in you, you know, it's not as if you're coming at it from a point of view of someone who's never like, experienced like that kind of level of Catholicism, or like the like, culturally that you're just, like throwing in these references. And it's all- you know, it would be weird for me in a song to write like civil partnership..., I'm trying to convey something institutional (Connolly).

Perhaps it is indicative of privilege for a songwriter to feel so comfortable using a word that so many have struggled with, however I prefer the idea that it is used here as part of a trend of reclamation. I argue that its use by non-married queer women is destabilising. It challenges normative ideas of what a wife constitutes, and contributes to the construction of a world where “wife” can be a queer term, creating a form of kinship that exists entirely outside of heteronormativity. As Freeman explains:

Longing to belong, being long: these things encompass not only the desire to impossibly extend our individual existence or to preserve relationships that will invariably end, but also to have something queer exceed its own time, even to imagine that excess as queer in ways that getting married or having children might not be (Freeman 51).

In “Handsome Wife”, queer relationships and temporalities are not only celebrated, but are divinised, replacing the need for traditional forms of worship, while also articulating the experiences of queer people and representing them through music.

Orla Gartland: identity, compulsory heterosexuality, and queer listening

Orla Gartland is a singer-songwriter from Dublin. She gained popularity in her teens when she began posting covers of songs on her YouTube channel under the username ‘MusicMaaad’. Since 2011 she has released a total of five EPs, and her 2021 debut album, *Woman on the Internet*, was nominated for Irish album of the year. Her music has been described as “refreshingly frank” as well as “highly relatable” (Bradley). In her own words, it consists of “lyrics to make you think, sung on top of big guitars and pop choruses to shout at the top of your lungs” (“Behind the music”). While Gartland’s music is different both sonically and lyrically to that of Pillow Queens, it seems to resonate deeply with members of the Irish queer community in a similar way. As one of the participants in this study noted; Gartland’s music is “so specifically Irish, and the things she sings about are very relatable” (anonymous). In my own experience, this is what drew me to her music. She has an uncanny ability to articulate distinct emotions and express them powerfully through song, and as is the case with Pillow Queens, her music makes me feel seen. Gartland herself is queer, having come out publicly as bisexual on Twitter in 2021, although few of her songs are overt in revealing this aspect of her identity. Rather, much of her music deals with themes of insecurity surrounding the self, and the struggle to find one’s place in the world. While these are by no means exclusively queer themes, often the way in which these themes are explored contains undercurrents of queer experience in some way, either in the text itself or in the way that is picked up by queer listeners. As such, her music creates a space in which queer people

can find “terms and templates for elaborating self-identity – for identity’s identification” (DeNora 68).

Only one of Gartland’s songs directly addresses queer experience, and is coincidentally, also the sole example of Catholic themes in her music. “Oh, GOD”, in contrast to the music I have examined previously, seems neither subversive nor celebratory - it simply is. The song details reminiscing on a past relationship that occurred “summers ago”, and that was kept hidden for fear of religious backlash; “I swore not to tell / I’m swallowed up by this Catholic guilt / Oh, God” (0.05-0.12). It is a narrative that many queer Irish people can relate to, and the song captures the sense of inner conflict that often comes hand-in-hand with queer desire. While much of the song is highly relatable to the wider queer audience, the song's title coupled with the specifically Catholic guilt (as opposed to just regular guilt) adds a significant layer of meaning for the queer Irish audience. The song is tense and frantic, jumping between memories of a kiss that “messed with [her] head” and grappling with “shame” and “blame” over fantasies of being intimate with the object of her affection, only to interrupt her own thoughts with the desperate cry of “I can’t control it” punctuated by the resigned “oh God”. At points there is relief from the chaos, when the tense mood of the song is interspersed with moments of tenderness. In each pre-chorus, the tone changes on the line; “I look at you and I know how I felt all those summers ago”. Gartland’s voice softens as she allows the fondness in, the anxiety almost forgotten before it comes crashing back with a descending motif that gives the sense of spiralling into panic. Additionally, the song’s unusual $\frac{5}{8}$ time signature heightens its tension. The uneven rhythm creates a sense of urgency and pushes the melody forward, which when coupled with the repeated line “I don’t wanna think about it” evokes the feeling of avoiding or running away from something. It’s a feeling that many queer people can relate to, and the song is one that many of us (particularly those of us who have felt the weight of Catholic guilt) feel seen by.

The third song on the singer's first album, "More Like You", depicts the experience of infatuation with another woman. Although not explicitly queer in its address, it *feels* undeniably queer in its description of 'obsessing' over a woman who is distant enough from the protagonist to be idealised and placed on a pedestal. "More Like You" calls to mind Nadine Hubbs' queer reading of Dolly Parton's "Jolene", in which they read the song as an "ode to the other woman's beauty and desirability", rather than an "adversarial, if not downright menacing" address to a woman who is in an adulterous relationship with the singer's significant other (72). Similarly, the woman addressed in "More Like You" occupies a kind of 'other woman' space. There is a reference to a third woman, who lies between Gartland and the subject of the song; "Every time she mentions your name / she says it like a prayer", as well as a sense of jealousy at their relationship; "getting caught up in the syllables / I wish I didn't care, but no" (1.15-1.23). However, this is overshadowed by the singer's own fixation on her as something sacred, worshipped by others as well as herself. Moreover, the song contains the same kind of rhapsodic pleading evident in "Jolene". The song opens with the lines "I love the way you sing/I've been trying to copy every word you say/ love the way you think" (0.01-0.16), and on first listen one might assume the song is addressed to a lover. Speaking of the song however, Gartland said:

"More Like You" was born from a petty friend jealousy I have for my best friend's other best friend. She's someone who I only ever heard good things about, someone I wanted to hate until I met her and - of course - I didn't. I loved her. When you don't have much access to someone it's easy to put them on a pedestal and forget that they have their own layered and complex life, you only see perfection. I became obsessed. I wanted to sing like her, I wanted to dress like her, I wanted to swap bodies with her... [it's] about identity, about yearning to switch lives with someone who makes it all look easy (Kellow).

Of course, music is open to interpretation, and while this quote emphasises the themes of insecurity and comparison, it does not negate the point made previously. In fact, I feel it raises another (queer) reading of the song as an expression of the desire to inhabit an easier life; perhaps one where you are not queer, or conversely, wherein you no longer feel uncomfortable with your queerness. A comment left under the song's music video provides yet another queer reading: "As a trans girl, this song hits home so hard" (@communistravenn6201).

Indeed, there are multiple ways to read the song. Most interesting to me however is the idea that the singer has fallen in love with the woman, but rather than recognising it as such, misinterprets her feelings as jealousy and anger. Her obsession is clear; she admits to "obsessing in the worst way" "flirting with the enemy" and catching herself looking at pictures of her, but still dismisses it as a desire to be *like* her rather than *with* her. It is an experience many of us have had of compulsory heterosexuality, wherein queer people (and in particular queer women) are compelled to conform to heterosexual norms even if it doesn't align with their true desires or identities (Rich 631-60). This idea can also be seen in another of Gartland's songs, "Madison". It deals with similar themes of obsession and yearning, that again are not explicitly queer, but can easily be interpreted as such, particularly for the queer listener. While it has been speculated that the song is about a former therapist of Gartland's (what could be queerer than falling for your therapist?), it could be read in a myriad of ways. Written, as most of Gartland's songs are, in the first person and in her signature intimate style, it is addressed directly to the song's namesake and features the same kind of rhapsodic pleading in "More Like You", with lyrics such as: "god you wear that shirt so well /if you're not perfect then I can't tell" and "I needed you then, now I need you again".

Even if much of Gartland's music is not explicitly queer, her insider status as a

member of the LGBTQ+ community allows listeners to find queer meaning in her songs. Speaking of her song “Heavy”, which could be read as a typical (heteronormative) break-up song, one participant said:

I think it conveys what I feel is a specifically queer feeling of yearning and loss regarding past relationships and even friendships. As a queer person, my past romantic experiences tend to remain dear to me and I think it's because I feel like I might not find connections like the ones I've had again... I find the heteronormative nature of life overwhelming at times, so I treasure any moments or experiences that allow me to truly be myself and grieve them when they're gone. I have no idea if Orla Gartland wrote this song about a past queer relationship or not, however that's just what I get from it personally (anonymous).

It seems that queer listeners can often find themselves in the music of queer artists, even if lyrically there is no obvious mention of queer themes – the articulation of specific experiences is enough to create connection, relatability and representation.

Towards a queer Irish utopia

As Ireland becomes more secular, the boundaries between religious and non-religious experience become blurred, and the sacred/profane dichotomy begins to collapse. Through this, it can be argued that a kind of new religion is being mediated by queer musicians that cultivates inclusivity for queer audiences. Fintan Walsh in *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland: Dissent and Disorientation* explores how Irish queer performance ‘articulates experience of oppression, exclusion and displacement, while imagining and cultivating more accommodating, inclusive, and sustaining modes of interpersonal intimacy,

social support, public participation and cultural belonging' (1). Although Walsh's book deals primarily with Irish theatre, this idea can also be applied to musical performance. Pillow Queens, and Orla Gartland (among others) are articulating the experience of existing as a young, queer person in Ireland, and the trials and tribulations associated with such an existence. Furthermore, through the repeated subversion of oppressive religious discourses, the song and video 'imagine and cultivate' a new kind of religion that is inclusive for, and indeed celebratory, of queer people.

In *Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia* Craig Jennex argues that fans of Lady Gaga not only "glimpse" solace, pleasure, and a more inclusive world, but "participate in this discourse with vigor" (357). Similarly, fans of queer Irish artists can find promises of a better future in music, through fostering of identity and community, representation and moments of spiritual transcendency. Through this quasi-religious experience, we have the potential to imagine an Ireland, and indeed a world, in which queer identities and kinship are not only accepted but celebrated, and where the constraints of the present are overcome through the creation of a utopian vision for the future.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

This thesis has explored the relationship between queer Irish identity, and Irish cultural Catholicism as revealed and complicated through music. Throughout this project, I have (perhaps somewhat ambitiously) attempted to quantify modern queer Irish identity and explore how it is both constructed and impacted by music. The primary threads throughout this work have explored the connection between queerness and Irish identity, the use and impact of religious language and imagery in music by queer Irish artists, and the role of this music in the construction of personal and collective identity for queer Irish listeners. In writing this work, I have attempted to demonstrate how often subversive musical acts by queer Irish musicians create relatability, representation and new hope for queer people who have found themselves in some ways excluded from notions of Irishness.

I provided an overview of the history and social context that impacts Irish identity which is, as I see it, intricately linked to the Catholic church and its establishments. I have delved into the enduring influence of the church on the Irish populace, examining the relationship between queer Irish life and Catholicism. Through examining literature and through participant interviews, I found that many queer people have, like me struggled to reconcile growing up with Irish cultural Catholicism with their queer identity. Moreover, that for some queer people, there exists an incongruence between queer identity and Irish identity. The entrenchment of Catholic conservative values in the Irish moral psyche has resulted in a society and a definition of Irishness from which we as queer people have historically been excluded. As noted by Conrad “homosexuality has been placed outside the limited discourse of what constitutes ‘Irishness’” (124). Many of those I interviewed felt then that their relationship to Catholicism was something that had to be divorced or let go from their identity in order to feel comfortable as an Irish person. Still, there is hope – seeing as there

have been vast changes in Ireland in recent years, and a movement away from the church's moral monopoly, the younger participants that I interviewed seemed to have a much easier time reconciling the faith they were raised in with their queerness. In fact, some of them felt it had actually helped people to accept them. The same participants were also quick to compare their musical experiences with religious or spiritual ones. It seems that younger generations are being raised in a more open environment, less so under the oppressive thumb of Catholicism and as such are not grapple with much of the religious trauma that older Irish queers do. Long may it continue.

Following this as a contextual background for the music I examined, I explored common themes in the music of Sinéad O'Connor and my first case study: Pillow Queens. I explored the use of religious imagery in their music, hypothesised reasons for its appearance and investigated its subversive power. I argue that although some scholars believe that the appearance of biblical and religious language in popular music can be inconsequential, that in an Irish context this is not the case. When an Irish musician references Catholicism in their work (particularly when the artist is queer), it will always be significant because of the cultural context from which it has come. Through examining three songs by Pillow Queens, as well as the examples drawn from Sinéad O'Connor's work, I highlight elements of subversion, protest, confession and reparation, threads that I believe can be found in the music of any Irish artist who addresses Catholicism in their music.

Finally, I explored the intersection of music spaces as spiritual spaces and the role of this in the musical imagining of a queer Irish utopia. Drawing from the work of DeNora and Small, I consider music as a tool for the construction of both personal and collective identity. In the context of queer Ireland then, I examined the role of music by queer artists in creating relatability through representation of Irish queer experiences. I have explored the connection

between music spaces and spiritual spaces, and the trends in fan experience that echo religious ones. Moreover, given the Irish people's history of finding identity through religion, I suggest that they may be more likely to connect euphoric music experiences with spiritual or religious experience. Ultimately, I argue that Pillow Queens and Orla Gartland, along with other artists, offer musical navigations of queer experience and combining this with consistently subversive approaches to oppressive religious discourses. In doing so, their music can allow listeners to envision and foster a quasi-religious utopia wherein queer identities are included, uplifted, and celebrated.

This has in its entirety been a work using "scavenger methodology." Something that struck me as I wrote this (particularly in the early research stages) was how little academic work has been done on queer Irish music. While much has been written on Irish music, and some (albeit surprisingly not much) on Irish popular music and religion, there is little work on the intersection of all three facets that this thesis explores. As such I am indebted to the queer musicologists who have laid the groundwork for this project, allowing me to connect the three central ideas of religion, queer theory and music. I am, however, acutely aware that the scope of this thesis has been limited by its length. I have focused only on three queer Irish musicians in this work, when the reality is that there are many more that could be written about (and likely many more I have yet to discover). Examples include Ailbhe Reddy, ZAPHO, Saint Sister and CMAT, to name but a few. Moreover, as noted previously I chose to focus exclusively on the Republic of Ireland, limiting further the conclusions I can truly make about the impact of religion on the Irish psyche as a whole, and how this is expressed through music. Ireland has an incredibly dynamic music scene, fuelled in large part by creative, talented resilient queers. My hope is that this field will continue to grow and develop in future to encompass the vast intricacies of queerness, religion, identity and music in Ireland, creating for Irish music scholars and musicians alike, a whole new space to roam.

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