Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dún Laoghaire
Faculty of Enterprise and Humanities.

Know No Shame: From Sinéad O'Connor's Protest to CMAT's *Euro Country,* the Redefinition of Irishness in a Post-Celtic Tiger Era.

How can the cultural performances of Sinéad O'Connor and CMAT be understood as sites through which Irish identity and Irish womanhood have been contested and redefined across two distinct but structurally connected historical moments?

By Ellamay Doyle Doherty

Submitted to the Faculty of Enterprise and Humanities in candidacy for the BA [Hons] in New Media Studies DL837 (2026)

Statement of Academic Integrity / Declaration of Originality

This thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA [Hons] in New Media Studies DL837. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted already for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed: Ellamay Doyle

Word Count: 2889

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Diog O'Connell for her continued support throughout this year and Dr Michael Murphy for his confidence and engagement with my practical project. I would also like to thank my fellow scholars, Emma Coleman and Simone Peat for their constant encouragement and support and also to mention Scarlet Shekleton for always lifting my spirits.

To my parents, Cara and Damian, thank you for letting me take up the kitchen table for the past while and for the tireless love and support.

Table of Contents

Introduction 4

Irish Identity, Womanhood and the Post-Independence State 5

Uneven Modernity and the World O'Connor Inhabited 6

Sinéad O'Connor: Collision, Misperformance, and Pathologisation 8

CMAT and the Post-Celtic Tiger Redefinition of Irishness 9

Conclusion 11

Bibliography 13

Introduction

Know No Shame is a four-episode podcast series that positions Sinéad O'Connor as a cultural martyr whose protest exposed the institutional influence of constructed identities of Irish womanhood, and CMAT as the symbolic inheritor of the cultural space that protest created. Sinéad's protest was not a moment but a condition: her entire existence, formed by institutional Ireland and shaped by trauma, constituted a sustained refusal to be silenced or to conform. Situating both figures as successive moments in the ongoing redefinition of Irish identity in a post-Celtic Tiger era, the podcast foregrounds voice and unmediated expression, the very register O'Connor was repeatedly denied. The series emerges from the research conducted in this essay, which asks: how can the cultural performances of Sinéad O'Connor and CMAT be understood as sites through which Irish identity and Irish womanhood have been contested and redefined across two distinct but structurally connected historical moments?

This question is approached through four interlocking theoretical frameworks: poststructuralist feminist theory, drawn from Breda Gray's *Women and the Irish Diaspora* (2004) and Ailbhe Smyth's 'Declining Identities' (1996), which treat Irish womanhood as a historically produced set of meanings constructed through Church, state and nationalist ideology; uneven modernity, drawn from Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin's *Reinventing Ireland* (2002), in which Michel Peillon argues that Irish modernisation has been consistently characterised by a disjunction between economic transformation and cultural conservatism, traced across the 1960s economic advancements and the Celtic Tiger post-crash present; performance studies, through Mary R. Chvasta's 'Sinéad O'Connor and the Collision of Bodies' in *Political Rock* (2013), which analyses how O'Connor's public persona constituted a misperformance of gender received as disorder rather than dissent; and gendered madness, drawn from Bergin, Wells and Owen's 'Towards a Gendered Perspective for Irish Mental Health Policy' (2013), which establishes the institutional basis for understanding how female dissent in Ireland has been pathologised rather than engaged.

The series aims to emerge in the society and culture genre of culturally critical Irish podcasting, with influence from *The Blindboy Podcast* in demonstrating how Irish cultural commentary has grown from histories of institutional suppression and cultures of shame and silence. To translate the academic argument into accessible public discourse, the series combines interviews, sound design, and archival material to create an engaging, narrative-

driven audio experience. The series features an interview with Michael Murphy, music industry professional and academic, and is structured to mirror the thematic arc of this essay: identity, emergence, protest, and legacy.

Irish Identity, Womanhood and the Post-Independence State

To contextualise how Sinéad's protest challenged dominant cultural expectations, it is important to understand the historical difficulties in constructing Ireland's "identity" in the period following independence. In this case, Sinéad falls under two categories of observation: 'Irish national identity' and the subcategory of 'Irish women'. The definition of 'identity' adopted in this essay derives from a critical survey by Ailbhe Smyth on 'Declining Identities', in which Smyth argues Irish identity functions less as a neutral description than as a site of 'contested meaning'[1], its ambiguity serving to obscure rather than dissolve the power relations that produce it. In the present context, 'identity' is understood as a historically constructed set of meanings operating through two interlocked registers: Irish national identity and the subcategory of Irish womanhood. Smyth asserts that the more precarious an identity's position, the more forcefully it asserts collective self-determination.[2] This dynamic is evident in the case of the Irish nation; following centuries of colonial rule, the emergence of the nation in the early 1920s generated an urgent imperative to consolidate a distinct national identity. As Smyth notes, the construction of Irishness primarily involved the rejection of Britishness, defining the nation through opposition. This resulted in the characterisation that "being Irish is about not being British"[3] rather than a settled or pluralistic understanding of Irish identity itself.

However, the process of establishing Irishness revealed stark contradictions in its treatment of Irish women. Drawing on Breda Gray's poststructuralist feminist framework in *Women and the Irish Diaspora*, we can examine how the newly established Irish Free State shaped its

---

[1] Smyth, Ailbhe. 'Declining Identities (Lit. and Fig.).' *Critical Survey,* vol. 8, no. 2, (1996), 143–58 (p.146). *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41555995. Accessed 05 Mar. 2026.

[2] Smyth, 'Declining Identities', p.148.

[3] Smyth, 'Declining Identities', p. 149.

political and social architecture in ways that disproportionately affected women, an influence reflected not just in cultural attitudes but enshrined in law. The contradiction was most visible in the distance between women's visibility during the revolutionary period and the subsequent treatment by the state in the decades following.

Uneven Modernity and the World O'Connor Inhabited

During the War of Independence, women were indispensable; Cumann na mBan mobilised thousands of women as couriers, intelligence gatherers and organisers and their participation was essential to the nationalist cause. Instead of recognising the benefits of women's agency, by 1937 the Constitution enshrined a woman's place within the home stating that "by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved"[4] framing domesticity as a matter of national principle repositioning women not as agents of national liberation but as symbols of national virtue. This legislatively enforced domesticity encountered resistance. Although emigration from Ireland is often linked to economic necessity, Gray argues that the social and cultural environment created post-independence framed emigration as 'a network and a lifeline to relative freedom'[5] which 'liberated' women from 'a moral obligation to keep up appearances' as the gendered imperatives of Irish modernity and pressure to consolidate national identity reduced them to a 'representative body of Mother Ireland.'[6] Comparing restrictive legislation such as the Public Dance Halls Act of 1935[7], which deliberately suppressed social and bodily freedoms, with the greater autonomy available to women during the Roaring Twenties in the United States and the increased workforce participation in the United Kingdom,[8] two principal destinations for Irish emigrants, demonstrates that emigration provided women with greater freedom from the regulation of sexuality and behaviour at home. The significant number of young women emigrating, approximately 28,000 to Britain by 1937 alone, was depicted by both the Church

---

[4] Bunreacht na hÉireann (1937) (Article 41.2) <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/pdf/en.cons.pdf> p.164

[5] Breda Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 3.

[6] Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora*, p. 41

[7] Bunreacht na hÉireann (1935), Public Dance Halls Act <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1935/act/2/enacted/en/html>

[8] Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora*, pp. 2-4.

and the media as a direct threat to the integrity of the Irish nation, with publications frequently characterising emigrant women as deserters, framing their departure as a 'loss of the nation's breeding stock' and a threat to national identity itself,[9] thereby embedding the gendered expectations that would come to define Irish society. It is within this climate of enforced female conformity that Sinéad O'Connor's later provocations must be understood.

The uneven development of culture and economy in Ireland constituted a defining and recurring tension throughout the 1960s and in modern Irish life. Between 1946 and 1951, women accounted for 57% of emigrants, vastly outnumbering men and highlighting a deeper structural failure, as Ireland lost half a million people from a population of less than three million during the 1950s.[10] Rather than addressing the connections between emigration and the country's social and cultural climate, policymakers, as Peillonion would argue, reinventing Ireland, focused primarily on economic reform rather than cultural change, a distinction that proved decisive for following generations.[11] This approach further rooted contradictions within the nation's structure. T.K. Whitaker's Economic Development of 1958[12] marked a shift away from the early Free State's self-sufficiency model, with foreign capital investment and export-oriented manufacturing forming the basis of Ireland's first significant period of economic modernisation.

This was the Ireland into which Sinéad O'Connor was born: a country modernising economically while its cultural life remained shaped by post-independence conservatism. As Peillon observes, Ireland had developed "a very uneven pattern of modernisation in different sectors of social life,"[13] with economic and cultural forces existing in a state of "tension and even contradiction"[14], systemic rather than incidental, and providing a critical framework for

---

[9] Gray, Breda. *Women and the Irish Diaspora*. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 1.

[10] Irial Glynn, 'Irish Emigration History', *EMIGRE: Current Irish Emigration and Return*, University College Cork, December 2012, updated 18 July 2024 https://www.ucc.ie/en/emigre/history/ [accessed 07 April 2026].

[11] Michel Peillon, 'Culture and State in Ireland's New Economy', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, ed. by Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 39–40.

[12] Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin, *Reinventing Ireland*, ed. by Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.6

[13] Peillon, 'Culture and State in Ireland's New Economy' p. 39.

[14] Peillon, 'Culture and State in Ireland's New Economy', p. 43.

understanding the cultural and economic climate that shaped O'Connor's attitudes towards Ireland. O'Connor came of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period of stark economic reversal. Spiralling unemployment and a mounting national debt had displaced whatever optimism the preceding decade's modernisation had generated, exposing the structural fragility beneath Ireland's brief economic progress. The fallout led to a new wave of mass emigration that would peak at an estimated 70,000 departures in a single year by the late 1980s. The structural pattern was recurring economic contraction met with cultural retrenchment and renewed pressure on those who remained to perform the stable, stoic Irishness the nation required in crisis.

Sinéad O'Connor: Collision, Misperformance, and Pathologisation

When Sinéad O'Connor emerged as a global figure in the late 1980s and early 1990s, she did not so much enter this landscape as collide with it. Drawing on performance studies, Mary R. Chvasta in 'Sinéad O'Connor and the Collision of Bodies' observed Sinéad through 'the notion that an individual is a compilation of selves' in which each of these 'selves' had 'roles to perform' that 'continuously implicate, affect, and effect each other.' This moment, as she terms it, is when bodies collide.

O'Connor embodied precisely that. Physically, her shaved head and unmanaged appearance constituted what Chvasta describes as 'a misperformance of gender'[15] a refusal of the visual codes of acceptable femininity that struck audiences as a contradiction before she had spoken a word. Conceptually, she was simultaneously victim and activist, Irish woman and critic of Ireland, Catholic and opponent of the Church.[16] The media response was immediate and revealing: rather than engaging with the content of her critique, critics and institutional spokespersons repeatedly reached for the language of mental illness, with a response from

---

[15] Mary R Chvasta, 'Sinéad O'Connor and the Collision of Bodies', in *Political Rock*, ed. by Mark Pedelty and Kristine Weglarz (Farnham: Taylor and Francis, 2013), p. 174.

[16] Chvasta, p.184-185

Frank DeRosa, spokesman for Brooklyn Bishop Thomas V. Daily, who framed O'Connor not as a political actor but as an object of institutional pity, 'the Holy Father,' he suggested, would want to pray for her, for she was, in his words, 'more to be pitied than condemned' and in need of 'some professional help.'[17] As Chvasta observes, such indictments effectively silence the accused, for any response the accused offers is immediately deemed suspect, a mechanism that reveals less about O'Connor's instability and more on the culture's profound discomfort with an Irish woman who refused to know her place.

The fragility of Irish national identity under pressure was not confined to women alone; it structured the reception of any Irish artist who refused the available scripts of acceptable Irishness. As Murphy observes in his review of Campbell's *Irish Blood English Heart*, second-generation Irish musicians operating between Ireland and Britain faced hostility from both directions simultaneously, with the Irish media launching what Campbell describes as vindictive attacks on artists like The Pogues for being insufficiently or incorrectly Irish.[18]Shane MacGowan's assertion that 'you increase being Irish when you leave it' captures the paradox precisely: distance from Ireland produced a more intensified, less managed Irishness that the culture at home could not absorb without feeling threatened. O'Connor, who built her international platform from within this same transnational cultural space, inherited the same double bind; her outspokenness read not as political courage but as national betrayal, her refusal of emotional management not as authenticity but as disorder. The mechanism through which this betrayal was managed was, as Bergin, Wells and Owen establish, deeply institutional: Irish women had historically been described as irrational and mentally weak, and the close alignment of Catholic authority with medical and political institutions meant that the language of psychiatric disorder functioned as a primary regulatory tool for containing female dissent.[19] The response was not engagement but pathologisation: with critics consistently reaching for the language of madness to silence a message they could not otherwise refute. O'Connor herself called out this mechanism: 'If Ireland wasn't still in the

---

[17] Chvasta, Mary R .176-177

[18] Michael Mary Murphy, review of *Irish Blood English Heart: Second Generation Irish Musicians in England*, by Sean Campbell, *Popular Music*, 31.1 (2012), 128–130 (p. 129).

[19] Michael Bergin, John S.G. Wells and Sara Owen, 'Towards a Gendered Perspective for Irish Mental Health Policy and Service Provision', *Journal of Mental Health*, 22.4 (2013), 350–360 (p. 357).

grip of the dregs of theocracy, a woman like me could live here happily. Without disrespect or humiliation.'[20]

CMAT and the Post-Celtic Tiger Redefinition of Irishness

The economic patterns Peillonion identified from the 1960s found their most revealing repetition in the Celtic Tiger of the 1990s. Ireland's rapid economic growth between 1995 and 2008 produced a new national story, one that situated Ireland as a modern European, cosmopolitan nation rather than one that generated genuine cultural transformation. The boom began to erase self-questioning in favour of a more marketable version of Irishness, exposing its shallowness. The years that followed saw Ireland begin to renegotiate its identity with new urgency. It is within this post-crash landscape that CMAT emerges with her campy, emotionally excessive persona, refuting the tourist board's version of Irishness. Her Euro Country album performs what Smyth identifies as the act of declining an imposed identity: refusing to be an unvarying symbol, refusing to be outside history, refusing to perform an Irishness that erases the contradictions she has lived within.[21]

Speaking to Glamour UK in May 2025 about Euro Country, she distanced herself from what she described as the 'fake version of our identity' constructed for external consumption, observing that 'there's this very romantic vision of Ireland but I grew up in a place where it's not very fun to grow up', and concluding with quiet precision: 'It is not me, it is not us.'[22] In rejecting this commodified image, CMAT is refusing precisely what Moane identifies as one of the most insidious legacies of colonial psychosocial conditioning: the internalisation of an externally constructed identity that papers over, rather than confronts the lived contradictions

---

[20] Sinéad O'Connor, 'This Week's Un-cut Version of *Irish Sunday Independent* Piece', *Sinéad O'Connor*, 18 September 2011, http://www.Sinéadoconnor.com

[21] Smyth, 'Declining Identities', p.146.

[22] CMAT, 'CMAT on Ireland's New Wave: "This Fake Version of Our Identity Was Being Built Up by Americans and English People and Claimed for Themselves", interviewed by Casey Cooper-Fiske, Glamour UK, May 2025 <https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/cmat-interview-2025>
[accessed 18 March 2026].

beneath it.[23] This tension between marketed and lived Irishness finds its sharpest expression in CMAT's, 'Euro Country' and 'Jamie Oliver Petrol Station'.

The romantic Irish emigrant narrative, as Gray argues, has historically functioned to aestheticise what was structurally an 'enforced requirement'.[24] CMAT refuses that aestheticisation entirely. Jamie Oliver Petrol Station does not sentimentalise leaving; it renders it mundane, undignified and specifically contemporary, the Ireland of motorway service stations and forecourt sandwiches rather than misty shores and nationalist longing. Her work engages with a globalised cultural landscape, referencing British and European cultural touchstones in ways that have attracted the same charge levelled at generations of Irish artists before her: that of not being sufficiently or correctly Irish. When listeners objected to the reference to Waitrose, an English supermarket chain in 'No More Virgos', CMAT's response was unapologetic. Acknowledging that she had lived in Manchester for two years, she refuted the idea that non-Irish cultural references required explanation, stating that she would 'not apologise for making references that aren't Irish.'[25]

26

This resistance to political speech is precisely what CMAT's live performances have begun to challenge directly. Where Chvasta identifies O'Connor's body itself as a sustained misperformance of gender, a refusal of the visual and behavioural codes of acceptable Irish femininity, CMAT's performances extend this refusal into explicit political address. At All Together Now festival in 2025 she used the performance space to speak directly to the failures of the Irish government, addressing the lack of opportunities for young people and the ongoing housing crisis, among other structural failures of post-Tiger Irish society. O'Connor's generation had no framework within which such speech from an Irish woman could be received as legitimate dissent rather than disorder and now CMAT can occupy a

---

[23] Geraldine Moane, 'Colonialism and the Celtic Tiger: Legacies of History and the Quest for Vision', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, ed. by Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 109–123 (p. 117).

[24] Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora*, p. 25.

[25] 'CMAT on Her Country Influences and Multilayered Songwriting', *Rolling Stone UK*, June 2022 https://www.rollingstone.co.uk/music/cmat-dublin-music-interview-15963/ [accessed 01April 2026]

festival stage and speak to governmental failure without being immediately pathologised reflects the cultural shift O'Connor produced.

Conclusion

The reception of Sinéad O'Connor produced a martyrdom Ireland required thirty years to acknowledge. Her challenge to the Catholic Church on a global stage did not simply confront an institution, it exposed the attitudes toward women that Irish national identity had quietly sustained since independence, making visible what the nation had invested enormously in concealing. The pathologisation she endured emerged from the same apparatus that had constitutionalised domesticity and institutionalised shame in the Magdalene Laundries, reaching for the language of madness when a woman refused the stoicism Ireland demanded because madness was the only framework that could name her without having to answer her.

CMAT carries the inheritance of that refusal into a post-Celtic Tiger cultural moment. A self-described gobby, bitchy and outspoken woman, she recognises precisely the atmosphere O'Connor navigated: 'Sinéad O'Connor would go on about something, and people would call her crazy. And if my mother spoke out about something, they would've been like, "You're fucking mental."[27] Where O'Connor had to endure this mechanism, CMAT names it and performs it, her critique of Celtic Tiger excess, her grief for a generation priced out of the country they love, all carrying the same fundamental refusal to be silent, wrapped in the irony and humour of a woman who has studied what happened to those who spoke plainly and chosen a different form of survival.

It is precisely this inheritance that Know No Shame sets out to trace. The podcast returns to the register O'Connor was repeatedly denied, voice unmediated and unmanaged, to make the argument that the cultural space she was punished for occupying did not disappear with her but was passed on. In foregrounding both figures not as biographical curiosities but as

---

[27]CMAT, '12 Interviews of Xmas: CMAT on the Church, Sinéad O'Connor, Transphobia, Irishness, and *Crazymad, For Me*', interviewed by Lucy O'Toole, *Hot Press*, 27 December 2023 https://www.hotpress.com/music/12-interviews-of-xmas-cmat-on-the-church-Sinéad-oconnor-transphobia-irishness-and-crazymad-for-me-23000100 [accessed 07 April 2026].

successive moments in the ongoing redefinition of Irish identity, the series asks its audience to hear what the culture spent decades refusing to listen to. That it can now be heard at all is itself evidence of the shift these women helped produce. Yet the structural conditions that made O'Connor's protest necessary have not been dissolved, only partially redistributed. The housing crisis continues, emigration continues and the gap between the Ireland the state projects and the Ireland its young people inhabit continues to widen. Which raises the question this essay cannot answer but cannot avoid asking: if O'Connor created the space and CMAT inherited it, who comes next? What form will the next refusal take, and will Ireland be ready to hear it before it requires another thirty years of vindication?

Bibliography

Bergin, Michael, John S.G. Wells and Sara Owen, 'Towards a Gendered Perspective for Irish Mental Health Policy and Service Provision', *Journal of Mental Health*, 22.4 (2013), 350–360

Bunreacht na hÉireann (1937), Article 41.2 <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/pdf/en.cons.pdf>

Bunreacht na hÉireann (1935), *Public Dance Halls Act* <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1935/act/2/enacted/en/html>

Chvasta, Mary R., 'Sinéad O'Connor and the Collision of Bodies', in *Political Rock*, ed. by Mark Pedelty and Kristine Weglarz (Farnham: Taylor and Francis, 2013), pp. 169–192

CMAT, 'CMAT on Ireland's New Wave: "This Fake Version of Our Identity Was Being Built Up by Americans and English People and Claimed for Themselves"', interviewed by Casey Cooper-Fiske, *Glamour UK*, May 2025 <https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/cmat-interview-2025> [accessed 18 March 2026]

'CMAT on Her Country Influences and Multilayered Songwriting', *Rolling Stone UK*, June 2022 <https://www.rollingstone.co.uk/music/cmat-dublin-music-interview-15963/> [accessed 01 April 2026]

Glynn, Irial, 'Irish Emigration History', *EMIGRE: Current Irish Emigration and Return*, University College Cork, December 2012, updated 18 July 2024 <https://www.ucc.ie/en/emigre/history/> [accessed 07 April 2026]

Gray, Breda, *Women and the Irish Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2004)

Kirby, Peadar, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin, eds, *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 1-21

Moane, Geraldine, 'Colonialism and the Celtic Tiger: Legacies of History and the Quest for Vision', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, ed. by Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp.109-123

Murphy, Michael Mary, review of *Irish Blood English Heart: Second Generation Irish Musicians in England*, by Sean Campbell, *Popular Music*, 31.1 (2012), 128–130

O'Connor, Sinéad, 'This Week's Un-cut Version of Irish Sunday Independent Piece', *Sinéad O'Connor*, 18 September 2011 <http://www.Sinéadoconnor.com>

Peillon, Michel, 'Culture and State in Ireland's New Economy', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, ed. by Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 38–53

Smyth, Ailbhe, ‘Declining Identities (Lit. and Fig.)’, *Critical Survey*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1996), 143–158. JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41555995> [accessed 05 March 2026]