



Boyz to Menz(own): Irish Boys Bands and the Alternative Nation

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Grunge, trash metal, rap, garage, and Britpop, the modes of rock and pop that dominated the United States as well as Britain in the 1990s, all consciously asserted group identities, whether that was one of class, racial grouping or nationality. For instance, the Britpop of the 1990s was for the most part notoriously nostalgic for an imagined and idealized pre-immigration pastoral Britain, and re-encoded many of the socially conservative and exclusionary values of punk before it.¹ Manufactured bands such as The Spice Girls or Take That were openly jingoistic and nationalist in their iconography and in their dress. In contrast, manufactured Irish bands, such as Boyzone and Westlife, who were exceptionally successful in both Irish and British markets in the 1990s and the early years of this decade, seemed innocently apolitical. Indeed, the only national associations they appeared to have were as exemplars of the new-found economic success of Celtic Tiger Ireland, which has depended above all else on marketing Ireland as a desirable place for overseas, and especially American, investors. Issues such as safety, reliability, social stability and community harmony needed to be emphasized for potential backers, as well as factors such as tax breaks, low-cost labour and a highly educated work force. This, and the technologies of reproduction upon which the Irish economy heavily relies, is echoed in the boy bands that reproduce the sounds, the harmonies of others, that make cover versions. The specificities of this mode of reproduction mean that far from representing nothing more than successful exploitation of a preteen and teen market, boy band cultural capital represents a cover version of a nationalist discourse in post-colonial Ireland.

Homi K. Bhabha contends that postcolonial societies depend not on their history, but rather on the nation's contemporaneous alterities. He writes:

The sense of the past, of ancestry, does not produce a resplendent, continuous national present; in the figure of the archaic, out of the alterity of the nation's historical present, emerges that reference to the future anterior of the nation – that space in which its authority and genealogy is established in relation to that which must have been given.²

For Celtic Tiger Ireland, the consolidation of a resplendently successful economic national present is popularly associated with a move away from nationalism, and official nation-state signifiers of Irishness, towards an internationally identified modernity. Commemoratively invoking a nationalist past and ancestry tied to a revolutionary nationalism is thus associated with fiscal retrogression, so the figure of the archaic becomes the site in which ideologies of national identity and futurity are grounded. The 'alterities' of the Irish 'nation's historical present' in 2005 are those people from minority groups who do not enjoy full human rights under the protection of the national body-politic: non-nationals, especially non-white peoples, women, travellers, homosexuals, and people who find themselves disabled by non-inclusive policies, inaccessible public spaces and transport. Feminized, racialized, homoerotic, travelling and 'disabled', the Irish boy band uses the signifiers of such alterities to establish 'authority and genealogy' and, like the Wren Boys with their balloon boobs, ushers in the 'future anterior' of a nation that will not honour those for whom such difference is not merely a signifier but a way of life.

These aspects of alterity – femininity, blackness, traveller life, homosexuality, and disability – are visually and performatively incorporated in the promotion of the boy band, and this incorporation supports a political and social architecture that constitutionally and legally disincorporates difference. In this operation, the boy band functions as a liminal body, representing those within and without the nation – its members *have* the bodies that matter and *perform* like the bodies that don't. The boys are marketed through a heavy reliance on the use of feminized signifiers such as lip-glossed pouts, shiny hair falling in curtains to gently frame their lovely, smooth faces, and through the assumption of highly submissive and come-hither poses. Their visual promotional material also cites male homoerotic pornography liberally, so that campness becomes the defining mode not only of femininity, but also of male homosexuality. A politics of colour is embedded in the politics and history of the 'cover version', the white boy heart-throb and the boy band in the United States, and narratives of overcoming obstacles and disabling environments, as well as living 'on the road', are regularly deployed in personal testimony by individual members.

So, how does the Irish boy band produce a 'resplendent continuous national present' from these 'alterities'? The patriarchal family that underwrites the Irish

Constitution is the historical site of exclusion for each of these very alterities, and the Irish boy band is explicitly modelled on the 'family'. Westlife and Boyzone derive from the original family formulas of the first boy/family bands such as the Jacksons and the Osmonds, and the trope of family features heavily not only in their well-advertised loyalty to one another, but also in their allegiance to their fans.³ Their invocation of the constitutional family is obvious in terms of the family values of good clean fun and Christian good looks that are associated with the boy bands, and in evidence when the boys pose for promotional shots in which they can be seen to be 'goofing' around, 'mussing' each other's hair and teasing one another like one big happy family. 'I love them like brothers', 'we are a like a family', 'like the family we are' are phrases often asserted in interview as a repeated core value of their group identity and, most importantly, of their success.

The family promoted in this deliberate reformulation is that of the upwardly mobile family that displays the bourgeois ambition needed to support an economy that depends on built-in obsolescence and inflated property prices. Like the manufactured boy band, this family is without 'background', at least without an aristocratic background the signifiers of which are increasingly emphasized as markers of social authority and success. Thus, this family seeks the authenticating signifiers of authority and genealogy associated with the British Empire, an 'authoritative' past, such as Georgian houses, dark-skinned domestic help and the military vehicles associated with the British Empire overseas. The four-wheel drives now so popular on Irish roads are sought after because they appear to align the driver with the aristocracy, but they also powerfully align the driver with North American imperialism. The Land Rover and Jeep of the British Empire have been superseded by the Humdee and Humvee of American military activity in the Middle East, and the excessive fuel needs of the SUV on Irish roads supports such American expansionism. This family very often employs Filipino or other non-national nannies and house-cleaners as a signifier of success; having a dark-skinned person work in a domestic or child-care capacity strongly aligns this family not only with the Anglophonic cultural remnants of the British Empire, but also with American upper-middle-class whites. However, it is not enough to simply purchase a past. The assumption of the colonial posture and signifiers already outlined has to be culturally represented so that they can be recast somehow as 'authentically', that is, ancestrally Irish.

In his 2001 essay, "'Blame it on Maureen O'Hara': Ireland and the Trope of Authenticity', the critic Colin Graham observes how authenticity overlaps with Irish nationalism. Graham argues that authenticity is in fact an operation and not a definable state, and that authenticity makes itself out of

reproduction, out of repetition: 'authenticity is thus constantly a cultural, textual phenomenon, defining, recreating and projecting.'⁴ Following this, I want to argue that the Irish boy band can be seen as a 'cultural, textual' *event*, which in its very being actually operates as 'authenticity' itself, despite its being self-admittedly and unashamedly musically and culturally inauthentic. So although the boy band, formed from auditions, marketed to strict formulas and producing only cover versions of proven hits, has no credibility in a music industry in which authenticity is measured by the extent to which you produce original music, resist market demands and are true to your own vision, the boy band plays a crucial role in authenticating the Celtic Tiger economy and its concomitant cultural superstructure.

Manufactured pop, itself inauthentic, can produce the experience of authentic community in a postmodern world. The national family gathers around the hearth of manufactured pop, and can feel for themselves and be a part of the nation's success. When the nation watches and votes as Euro-star decides who will represent Ireland in the Eurovision Song Contest, this 'interactive' televisual event and staple of Sunday night entertainment becomes a touchstone and means of phatic connection between strangers and colleagues who otherwise have little in common. Sport already fulfils this function, but is largely the prevail of men, and these programmes in which the means of its own production is not only displayed, but is also fetishized, are largely associated with female audiences, usually teenage girls, and are like much of mass pop culture (unlike that of mass sport culture), tacitly, if not often overtly, considered trivial because overwhelmingly feminized.⁵ As well as tapping into the family-centred articulations of Irish nationhood enshrined in de Valera's constitution, it also encodes a powerful appeal to republican notions of fraternity and brotherhood. As 'bands of brothers', these young men are united, if not by blood, by love for and fierce fidelity to one another and the eroticised band. The real object of their love ballads are not the imaginary women featured in their videos: the 'you' addressed by the 'I' is another band member, as they make eyes at, flirt with and croon to each other when they sing. The eroticized band and its continued success replace the love of the country – the feminized nation that was the untouchable love object of the romantic nationalist balladeers. Instead, the 'feminized' band replaces the nation, which had the boy at the centre of much of its cultural activities. Boyhood and the boy were central to the practices and visions of cultural-nationalist movements such as the Fianna, the IRB and Pádraig Pearse's social experiments at St Edna's. The cultural-nationalist notion of brotherhood, solidarity and revolutionary fraternity underwrites and shadows the seemingly apolitical bands of young boys who appear innocently interested only in success, themselves and goofing around.

Like the republican brotherhood, band members evoke a narrative of personal sacrifice and emotional restraint as they talk about the path to success. However, unlike the romantic nationalist balladeers whose love was never made, the boy band 'makes it', and its success is conflated with national affirmation, although it is never an explicit aspect of their performance.

So, what is making 'it'? Ostensibly, it is about the continued self-reproduction of the self-sustaining economy of the band. The band is the apparent end of its own existence, and its own construction, success and existence the aim of its own desire. Here are some sample quotes from the fan's websites, posted at the height of Westlife's success: 'we just want to keep going'; 'to keep making hits'; 'to keep on making it'; 'we just care about staying together'; 'the band is the most important thing'.⁶ This demonstrates another function of authenticity, and is an example of what Graham calls authenticity's 'own best scenario', which is 'an integrity (or "loyalty") which demands an unquestioning belief in a wholeness involving the individual and his/her social context'.⁷ The band appears to function as a social context, a family, which shelters the quoted boy, and an aura of authenticity is generated from this fierce loyalty (even when band members leave, they are at pains to stress how they will always be there for each other, love the others, will always be friends). Further, by being its own object, the band becomes a textbook demonstration of Adorno's observation about a cultural phenomenon displaying its own mode of construction; it displays its own manufactured status as central to its own integrity, as central to its authenticity, and performs a nationalism that creates an updated body-politics. For, as Adorno noted in 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', such a display is not designed to unpick or undermine the ideology it supports but serves instead to shield it from its own potential to deconstruct itself. According to Adorno, in this instance what is 'brought to bear is a general uncritical consensus, advertisements produced for the world, so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisements'.⁸ The boy band advertises itself, and implicitly advertises the Ireland of investment welcomes, clean, happy, harmonious and racially homogeneous, a stable site of investment. And, like a bridge over the northern troubles, it offers a counter-reality to the advertisements of Ireland produced for the world by those other nationalists from the 1970s to the early 1990s. Instead of deconstructing itself, it endlessly supports and reproduces itself through the collapse of object and subject, 'it keeps on making it'. Reliant on video as a marketing device, the video itself is the perfect embodiment of simultaneous advertisement and product.

Such self-advertisement also propels the reproductive ideology so central to nationalism. Although Adorno may not have picked up on the connotations

of 'brought to bear' when he discusses ideological reproduction, the words betray a repressed aspect of nationalist ideological reproduction; the cultural imitation and appropriation of the function of birth – a commandeering that has been inseparable from the political and social policing of women's reproduction. Irish boy bands replicate themselves in a manner that is not culturally specific to Ireland, but which has a most particular function in an Irish context. The eroticization of the boy within patriarchal cultures functions to create the boy as an elevated alternative to woman, and such boys not only embody and perform youth and nationally spiritual maidenhood, but also embody and perform motherhood and birth. Effectively, they give birth to their elders, to 'authority and genealogy', that is, to 'that which must have been given'. This means of self-generation depends on a virile display of maternal function – the very maternal function that, in the context of contemporary Ireland, is precariously placed at the legislative and constitutional borders of Ireland, both in terms of the 12,000 women who travel to Britain every year to have an abortion, and in terms of the non-national pregnant women who threatened the economic integrity of international, multicultural Celtic Tiger Ireland.

The young girls who will become these borderline women constitute the boy band's largest fan base. Psychoanalysis identifies fandom in one of its aspects as a form of veiled hostility, a practice of possessive exclusion. Fandom is also about being as well as having, and is a behaviour profoundly linked with the oral stage of development, behaviours which in adults manifest themselves not only as the more recognizable actions of sucking, kissing, smoking, eating and drinking, but also in the desire for incorporation. The fan wishes to consume, to take into his or herself the qualities of the idol, to ingest and to assimilate them, and usually does so by using products linked to the idol, as, for instance, in wearing a football jersey with a number corresponding to the idol's position, or using a shampoo endorsed by the hero, and thus shoring up a whole economy based on star endorsement. Fandom is about wanting to be and to have; the very distinction that Lacan argues distinguishes masculinity and femininity in relation to the phallus. Put simply, Lacan argues that men derive power through *having* the phallus (the object of desire) and women derive power through *being* the phallus (being the object of desire through ornamentation and display). In the case of the boy band fan, the young girl wishes to take the young feminized man within her, to have his power as a female impersonator. In such a scenario of identification, the fan does not want only to have the idol, but to be him, to be both genders. Unlike the woman displaying femininity, that is, the young woman 'being the phallus', the feminized young male has the phallus and can eat it too.⁹ Because he both *is* and *has* the phallus, his display

of femininity is underwritten by access to the social and political power that comes from having, not being. The fan feels penis envy, where she wishes for the access and power that come from patriarchal identification. The penis the fan envies, however, is not the one Freud imagined, but the maternal phallus, the display of femininity which Marjorie Garber, rereading Lacan, observes at the heart of cross dressing.¹⁰ For the profound desire for incorporation in 'fanatic behaviour' signals that this derives from a time before the oedipal scene divided women from having the phallus, having power. Thus the young girl desires the experience of effective and successful public maternal power displayed most successfully in our cultures by young men. As a result of this successful performance and execution by men, she will not experience this publicly supported and affirmed power as a grown woman, but she will instead be offered the often distorted compensatory and affiliative power of the mother in the private sphere.

Correspondingly, boy bands mother themselves. Irish boy bands have within a remarkably short time created for themselves an authenticating background to counter their manufactured status in an ostensible oedipal transmission between generations of fathers and sons, upon which popular accounts of Irish history are based. In such narratives, the foregrounded gender is masculine, with the emphasis on the journey from boy to man, where, effectively, the father 'succeeds' the son as an authenticating historical presence. An article in the 2004 Christmas edition of the *RTE Guide* featured a special on the fathers of Westlife, profiling their work and personal histories, and their musical or performative 'talents'.¹¹ Thus, the 'ancestral past' is established in a line from son to father, in which it appears as if the father's retrospectively created persona was always pregnant with his son's success. Correspondingly, Bryan McFadden's solo single 'Irish Son' calls for a patriarchal visitation to set the nation to rights, by invoking the name of the father:

Our father who art in heaven
Come down here and make your presence known
We can't do it on our own
The lunatics let run the asylum
How can we find peace inside your home
When you can't trust your own.

Despite the fetishization of the father, the precipitating and transmissional actions of this manoeuvre are maternal, though never named as such. For, in this operation, the band, like 'authenticity', in Graham's words, 'falsely construct[s] itself as essence and origin'.¹²

To explain this, it is necessary to look at the lifespan and the reproductive habits of boy bands themselves. Boy bands follow a pattern of being

nurtured by a mother manager, who forms them into an incubating circle from which an individual is eventually born, who then goes on to create his very own circle or womb for the spawning of a new individual. The promotional shots of the bands feature circles prominently, often lit from within like the birth pods of science fiction, and reminiscent of the heraldic and epiphanic scenes from films such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* when the aliens or humans are 'delivered' unto earth.¹³ The original Irish boy band, Boyzone, was created and nurtured by Louis Walshe, who decided the hairstyles, clothes, behaviours and image of the band, and this circle in turn produced Ronan Keating, who created Westlife, which in turn spawned Bryan McFadden, who has become the manager of Franklin, a white South African band. The bands become essence and origin, become mother, not in spite of but *because* of making a powerful appeal to the modes of masculinity imbricated in nationalist culture.

In *I'm a Man: Sex, Gods and Rock'n'Roll*, the poet and critic Ruth Padel notes that the central concept of authenticity in rock criticism and rock mythology derives from the tropes of blues and folk music, the two predecessors to modern rock.¹⁴ Both of these forms of music grew out of situations of extreme poverty, oppression, exploitation, social and political constraint and marginalization. This was the music of revolt, protest and objection, disabling pain and circumstances, and, certainly, abjection, and Padel points out that the trope of oppression has classically been invoked by rockers to give their music a 'real' edge. For white middle-class rockers, the source of oppression is usually the preceding generation, conservative family values often represented by mothers or restrictive wives, and the music establishment itself. Increasingly, rock has attempted to authenticate itself as the 'real' music of oppression, and despite various '-athons' for charity, it has little real possibility of intervention in political or social oppression. 'Authenticity' continues as a trope through the means of genre and fan distinction, with cult, 'real', true bands being those that are singer-songwriter based and who take as long as possible before selling out. For rockers these days who take themselves seriously, the oppressor is more often than not mass culture, the pop industry itself, which is largely supported by girls and is thus feminized. Therefore, part of what is invoked in citations of blues and rock today is masculinity; it constructs men out of boys, often detailing rites of passage from the world of boys to the world of men via such props as drink, guns and easy women. Thus, part of any claim to authenticity in rock is a claim to maleness, and a form of separation from the 'feminised' sphere of mass culture.

So how does the boy from the band authenticate his 'manliness', his maleness, as a peddler of feminized pop to girls? George Michael left

Wham! to establish himself as a rock auteur, as an authentic singer-songwriter who sings his own 'real' material. Robbie Williams left the family of Take That to authenticate and individuate himself in similar terms. Both Michael and Williams ditched their clean-cut-boy look immediately, swapping the smooth-skinned-boy visual for stubble. The punctuation mark of the careless half-beard, with its connotations of an unchecked masculinity, marked them off as a man and as an 'individual', and this signifier was also adopted by Ronan Keating and Bryan McFadden. However, these Irish boy band offspring sought individual authenticity not simply as men, but also as managers. As well as rock revolt and artistic individuation, they sought managerial and executive powers. The desire on the part of the breakaway members of Boyzone and Westlife to be a manager rather than a rocker inauthenticates them as rock individuals, as 'that sort of man', but they are otherwise authenticated as the face of the new Irish man(ager): as the rock oppressor. Not only is this another version of the colonial reversal of the boy-man dialectic, and one complicated by what Graham observes as the liminal status of Ireland as a postcolonial culture,¹⁵ but it is a powerful revelation of what Adorno calls 'the concoctions of the culture industry'.¹⁶ These, he goes on, 'are neither guides for a blissful life, nor a new art of moral responsibility, but rather exhortations to toe the line, behind which stand the most powerful interests. The consensus which it propagates strengthens blind opaque authority.'¹⁷ Rock revolution is not then, in this case, rebellion, but imitation and assimilation and the Irish postcolonial man is thus initiated as a defender of 'the most powerful interests', as 'the Establishment'. Irish managers are exported back to Britain, exposing the complex symbiosis so often elided in popular postcolonial readings of Ireland's relation to Britain. Louis Walsh has achieved career-making and -breaking status in Britain, where he presides as a judge on shows such as *Pop Idol*, and *The X Factor*. The rapid process of decolonisation involved in sharp economic growth is dramatized in this advertisement for Irish national identity.

In the cycle of a boy band life and afterlife, the feminized, infantilized boy of colonized Ireland grows to be a man, who becomes manly through oppression. Bryan 'I write all me own lyrics' McFadden combines being a manager with being a rocker-singer-songwriter persona, complete with counter-culture long hair; trademark stubble; Sex Pistols, Che Guevara, Jimi Hendrix and John Lennon T-shirts. These seek to mark him, not only as musically 'authentic', or in the words of his own song, 'Real to Me', but also as authentically Irish. His first, self-penned album on leaving Westlife has a national framing device and is called 'Irish Son'. This lyrically explicit Irish identification can happen only after the boy has left the band, and is

associated with a return to roots, aligning him with a tradition of national sons whilst rejecting the nation's recent past:

I seen so much that has changed me
Just break with your past
Feed your own mind
Cos' this Irish son has moved with the times.

As Bhabha observes, 'the narrative of melancholia preserves the icon of the Ideal-Nation – but by virtue of identifying with it from a position of loss and absence, exile and migration: the signifying act that gives it meaning cannot be contained or incorporated within the sign.'¹⁸ McFadden can only openly construct the nation from a position of exile, both from the band and the country he has 'left' to see 'so much that has changed me'. The signifying act, the authenticating event of the boy band that gives meaning, cannot itself 'be contained within the sign', and its significance must be signalled from without. Bryan McFadden, previously one of the eroticized circle of the band, is now Brian McFadden, son of Westlife, grandson of Boyzone, and part and purveyor of the familiar narrative of melancholia that shores up such a national ideal.

Just as the nation spawned from the political rebel, the republican hero, became an oppressive nation, fearful and punitive of alterity, especially the alterities that had been harnessed in its service, the man(ager) spawned from boy bands also defends against the alterities that it had exercised in its promotion of itself. In becoming a man and taking on the mantle of the nation, he sheds the signifiers of alterity, of the nation's continuous presence, sheds the feminine, sheds narratives of obstacles, personal difficulties and disabling environments, sheds camp gayness, sheds difference. McFadden's opening lines to 'Irish Son', originally, 'I was born in the heart of Dublin / Back when being gay wasn't cool', became in a later version: 'I was born in the heart of Dublin / To a holy book full of rules'. In this redressing, the earlier identification with camp and flirting with homoerotic imagery on which the band had become successful is replaced with a formulaic fist shaken at a church the authority of which would have been only nominal during the years in which McFadden was educated. The lyrics also celebrate a freedom from the disabling environment of Ireland represented by church and school. To further underline this detachment, the boy band member often marries; the most celebrated example is Kian Egan, one of Westlife, who married Bertie Ahern's daughter. This ascension to establishment manhood was emphasized when Kian and his fellow boy band members subsequently sat in the front row of the 2003 *Fianna Fail Ard Fheis*, commanding more camera time than Ahern during national

television news coverage. In this vignette, the powerful visual of the country's most adored boy band listening attentively and piously whilst being voiced over by exhortative Fianna Fail rhetoric tells its own story, one in which the name of the father-in-law is strengthened by the propagating sons and real politick and popular culture are far from being mutually incompatible, and clearly one in which 'the consensus which it propagates strengthens blind opaque authority'.

Such consensus was evident in the results of the citizenship referendum of 2004, in which four out of five people voted to restrict grounds for eligibility for Irish citizenship. The referendum raised a number of questions about race and racism, which were unsatisfactorily addressed in the proposed amendment and which remain pressing in terms of social and political practice in contemporary Ireland. Indeed the resistance to the acceptance of those who are visibly racially other in Ireland is not unrelated to the politics of white-boy heart-throbs and the proliferation of cover bands in Ireland at a time when the country saw unprecedented numbers of people from other cultures arrive to live and work on the island. For, Padel argues, in white western twentieth-century culture, blackness is constructed as the heart in heart-throb, and she notes that, 'in spite of racism white culture through the twentieth-century has developed a close symbiotic relationship with black art, black values.'¹⁹ However, this relationship is not one of equality or reciprocity, but one of subsumption and assimilation, achieved largely through the specific operations of mass market and celebrity culture. In light of this, Adorno's observations on the role of the star system in the culture industry are illuminating:

Its ideology above all makes use of the star system, borrowed from individualistic art and commercial exploitation. The more dehumanised its methods of operation and content, the more diligently and successfully the culture industry propagates supposedly great personalities and operates with heart-throbs.²⁰

By observing how white boy heart-throbs are promoted as the most desirable form of embodied subjectivity in white American cultural nationalism, a sobering and useful means of elucidating the cultural mechanisms at work in an Ireland dealing substantively for the first time with racial difference can be provided. In twentieth-century American culture, the cult of the white boy heart-throb operated very powerfully as a way of preventing the integration of black culture, politics and society. In 'The Domestication of Rock and Roll: From Insurrection to Myth', Larry Bennett observes how blues and rock and roll hits were 'covered' by wholesome white singers, thus containing the perceived threats to white middle-class American family values represented by miscegenation and licentious sexual behaviour:

Major record companies recruited film and television personalities such as Tab Hunter and Rick Nelson to make sanitised recordings for the teenage audience and there was little chance that wilder performances could cross over from the 'race' or 'rhythm and blues' markets to the larger white teenage audiences. As soon as race records became hits in regional markets or among black teenagers, more controlled 'cover versions' would be recorded by white performers.²¹

Bennett details how the career of Elvis Presley, the most famous white boy heart-throb, was managed in order to contain and sublimate any potentially undermining aspects of his act, namely visual and performative citations of blackness. Simon Frith notes, in his famous study of pop culture, *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop*, that Elvis's widespread success was in large part due to the visual appeal that his look and his act made to Hollywood's version of 'fervid adolescence'.²² Elvis sang black, but not too black, and looked white. The fetishization of display, of 'femininity' in mass culture, meant that the increasing use of TV and film was central to the marketing of the heart-throb, and to the repression of blackness, evidenced as much as anything else by MTV's initial ban on playing videos by black artists. Padel keenly observes that the assimilation of blackness into representative white bodes is the popular cultural equivalent of the assimilation of black and so-called 'primitive art' into high modernism and on into postmodernism. Just as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* remains the quintessential text in which the mythology of an authenticating black heart or centre, a rhythm or life pulse makes whiteness edgy, revolutionary, cool and sexual, so a blues riff or a soul edge give white music a 'heart'. Such blackness is incorporated into the explicitly white Irish boy band when they harmonize like acapella groups, croon and evoke the blues and soul, and of course have a repertoire entirely made up of cover versions. In fact, a visual play on black and white features prominently in Westlife's promotional material. Many of the photographs feature the boys dressed all in white against a black background, or in black against a white, and involve a recurring lighting motif of stark chiaroscuro.²³ Blackness and whiteness are visually separated, in a virtual world that clearly aligns the boy bands with white. The boy band's success contrasts with Ireland's first 'cover band' of the 1990s, The Commitments, which did not succeed because it was too 'black'. The manager, Jimmy Rabbit Junior, identifies the Irish as the 'niggers of Europe' in a bid to align his band with the great blues singers. Its 'heart of darkness' was not effectively 'covered', and a miscegenating grey somewhere between black and white visually distinguishes the film.

This convergence of masculinity and blackness in the creation of idealized whiteness, the perfect national subject, is more than problematic for

anyone who cannot aspire to this mode of embodied subjectivity. A powerful and explicit demonstration of the idealization of the white boy/woman as the most desirable body to be is evident in the visual evolution of the American pop star Michael Jackson. Jackson, originally a black boy in one of America's first boy bands, has visually transformed himself over the years into a white woman, and lives on a ranch called Neverland, named after the home of Peter Pan, the boy who didn't grow up. This exhibits a desire on Jackson's part to remain the perfect object of desire in a value system that excises adult blackness from its cultural register. Moreover, the whitening-up and feminization of Jackson overtly illustrates the conjunction of race and gender in this operation. Padel also links the powerful trope of an authenticating inner darkness to a fantasy of possessing a womb, and this idea has a number of possible applications to authenticity as an event. The taking of the womb into oneself is the taking into oneself of the material origin of one's being, the autochthonic making oneself the source of one's own life. In the case of the promotional material for Westlife, for instance, the dark inner womb is externalized and replaced by an outer womb of light that emanates from the centre of the circle of boys.²⁴ When the boys are lit from behind and from within, this reversal of the darkness is also an ironic reversal of the feminine adoration of the boy in his many fans, as the desire to incorporate the womb, to incorporate Mummy, is the most fundamental form of fandom. What happens here is the systematic eradication of the matter from which we come, from the most profound and primary alterity of all, the mother's flesh. As one's own self-generating space there is need only of the signifiers of difference, and no need of radical alterity, thus the future produced is one in which alterities are shed. The covalence of race and gender in the requisitioning of the function of birth is also evident in the film version of *The Snapper*, based on one of Roddy Doyle's Barrytown trilogy and a follow-up *The Commitments*. In the film of *The Commitments*, pictures of Elvis Presley in the kitchen of the Rabbit household replace the traditional icon of the Holy Mother, and Presley is worshipped by Jimmy Rabbit Senior. Rabbit Senior does not explicitly denigrate the black singers whom his son wishes his band to emulate, but he admonishes his son's foolishness from the beginning, asserting that there was only one king, one musical god. In *The Snapper*, Jimmy Senior, advocate of the white crooner, becomes intimately involved with his daughter's pregnancy to the extent that he becomes mother-like himself. This seemingly random reassignment of roles and generations as well as the retrospective establishment of a genealogy can be usefully examined through the figure of Elvis and the staggering phenomena of Elvis impersonators.

For Elvis, the quintessential boy heart-throb, eventually becomes mother. His later Vegas act, as Garber points out, was effectively a drag act, and was heavily marked by gender transgression, by what she calls an 'unconscious of transvestism'.²⁵ This was not simply in terms of decoration, but was also the condition of his body shape, which resembled that of a pregnant woman. Elvis impersonators overwhelmingly choose, as Garber further points out, to impersonate not the younger Elvis but the later Vegas glitter version. The desire to incorporate, to become Elvis, is most profoundly the desire in this case to become Mummy. And this desire to be Mummy, and the incorporation and consumption of her, means that actual Mummy, and especially black Mama, is a threat to the authenticity, power and function of masculinities and nationalisms predicated on this. That the recent referendum on Irish citizenship took as its iconographic and anecdotal bogey woman the spectre of a pregnant black woman, who threatened to swallow up, devour and incorporate the economy if she was to be allowed to claim Irish citizenship by way of her child, is no surprise given the building blocks used to construct recent popular Irish model citizens. Boy Mummy on the other hand is no threat, for he gives birth to the authenticating history needed by a culture in search of 'that which must have been given'. Celtic Tiger Ireland, in its journey from boy to postcolonial man, and in the reproduction of the cultural ideology it claims to have left behind, has created a society of sameness, in which boy makes man, and the cultural dominant is, in Irigaray's terms, 'hommo-sexual', in which only one sex symbolically exists, and which reproduces itself through incorporation and partial display of the differences, the dissidents, the (m)others which it symbolically represses.²⁶ Or, as Adorno puts it, 'what parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessantly new which it offers up, remains the disguise for an eternal sameness.'²⁷ The Irish postcolonial nation thus finds itself in the figure of the archaic, as Bhabha asserts, in the figure impersonating the archaic flesh of the mother, reproducing the same in the name of progress and modernity. The nation's 'authority and genealogy is established' thus, and instead of the abjected citations the boy band employs being deployed to radically embrace difference in the Irish nation state, the queer boy band is used to produce normative national subjects and to re-entrench as queered those bodies constituted as abjected outside the symbolic and legislative economies. At stake in this history, as in popular culture, is an event of national authenticity based on performing maternity through the fetishization of the maternal phallus and the propagation of the fiction that this display, this history, is all about men and boys. Not so: Papa it seems was no rolling stone, no siree, Papa is quite other, indeed, quite mother.

Notes and References

- 1 For a detailed discussion of British nationalism and constructions of race and pastoral in Britpop, see Andy Bennett, "'Sitting in an English Garden": Comparing Representations of "Britishness" in the Songs of the Beatles and 1990's Britpop Groups', in Ian Inglis (ed.), *The Beatles, Popular Music and Society: A Thousand Voices* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 189–206.
- 2 Homi K. Bhabha, 'A Question of Survival: Nations and Psychics States', in James Donald (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory: Thresholds* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 95.
- 3 There are a number of websites carry interviews in which the boys express these and similar sentiments (the websites are updated regularly and so the exactness of these quotes varies; for instance, some of the interviews in which I first read such sentiments are no longer online, however, variations of them can be found in almost all of the interviews given by the bands). The official fan club websites for Westlife and Boyzone are www.westlife.com and www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Studio/7144/. There are a number of other well-maintained sites that also include this material such as www.westlife.org, www.westlifeweb.com, www.personal.u-net.com/~ezz/theboyz/theboyz.html. Websites dedicated to 'breakaway' members include, www.ronankeating.com/site.php and www.bryanmcfadden.org.
- 4 Colin Graham, "'Blame it on Maureen O'Hara": Ireland and the Trope of Authenticity', *Cultural Studies* 15:1 (2001), 62.
- 5 See Gayle Wald, "'I Want It That Way": Teenybopper Music and the Girling of Boy Bands', for a discussion of mass culture and femininity (http://www.genders.org/g35/g35_wald.html). I was not aware of Wald's article when I researched and wrote this essay, despite the many similarities between our analyses and conclusions. My thanks to Diane Negra for alerting me to it.
- 6 See note 3 above.
- 7 Graham, op. cit., 63.
- 8 Theodore Adorno, 'The Culture Industry Reconsidered', in Brian O'Connor (ed.), *The Adorno Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 233.
- 9 The argument in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990) is a playful reassignment of Lacan's theories of the centrality of the phallus. See also Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Middlesex: Penguin, 1977).
- 10 Majorie Garber, 'Cross-dressing, Gender and Representation; Elvis Presley' in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds.), *The Feminist Reader* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 166–7.
- 11 *Observer Magazine* ran a similar article on the fathers of U2, called "In the Name of the Fathers": Bono Talks About Life and Death and Why Their Dads are the Real U2'. The cover photograph featured the fathers' heads superimposed on their corresponding son's bodies in an iconic U2 shot (*Observer Magazine*, 6 February, 2005).
- 12 Graham, op. cit., 64.
- 13 For many examples of this, see www.westlife.com.
- 14 Ruth Padel, *I'm a Man; Sex, Gods and Rock'n'Roll* (London; Faber & Faber, 2000)
- 15 Graham, op. cit., 66.
- 16 Adorno, op. cit., p. 237.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Bhabha, op. cit., p. 101.
- 19 Padel, op. cit., p. 184.

- 20 Adorno, op. cit., p. 233.
- 21 Larry Bennett, 'The Domestication of Rock and Roll: From Insurrection to Myth', in Ronald Edsforth and Larry Bennett (eds.), *Popular Culture and Political Change in Modern America* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 143.
- 22 Simon Frith, *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), p. 218.
- 23 www.westlife.com.
- 24 www.westlife.com.
- 25 Garber, op. cit., p. 165.
- 26 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- 27 Adorno, op. cit., p. 233.