

# SISTERS:

Exploring how choices, family, and the passage of time shaped  
the lives of Irish nuns in Texas

by

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In the 1950s, two 18-year-old sisters from rural County Roscommon, Ireland immigrated to a convent in San Antonio, Texas to become nuns. They spent the rest of their lives teaching in the American South, Mexico, Ghana and Zambia—dedicated to the education of African-Americans and other marginalized communities. The primary work of my thesis consists of an audio story that examines the series of life choices made by these two nuns, Sister Jo Murray and Sister Gabrielle Murray, who are my great aunts. The project is a compilation of recorded interviews that deal with the intricacies of immigration, choice, faith and future. The following thesis document examines the methods, radio programs, and histories that informed my reporting and production.

## **Acknowledgements**

This project did not start out as my thesis. It began as a whimsical idea while cooking dinner with my parents nearly three years ago, “the nuns in Texas, now, that would be a great story wouldn’t it? Maybe someday I’ll do that.” There are numerous people who helped take a kitchen brainstorming session and turn it into the capstone of my formal journalistic education. My deepest thanks goes to the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate in San Antonio, Texas—especially to Sister Josephine Murray and Sister Marion (Gabrielle) Murray. You opened up your home, your memories and your hearts to me over and over again, and I am eternally blessed and honored to be the one to tell your stories.

To Professor Torsten Kjellstrand, who was the first one to see the potential and importance in making this project something more. Thank you for your guidance, patience, and excitement as we figured out how to piece this thing together. To all those who gave me edits and advice along the way: Professor Joseph Fracchia, Eric Weiner of NPR, my endless mentor David Austin, my Irishman Ian Anderson—without the encouragement from each of you, these interviews would still be alone in a folder on my computer marked “to do.” And to my parents, who made sure Ireland was home—thank you for carrying my audio gear, fielding late-night editing phone calls, and flying me across the Atlantic for all those years.

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## Introduction

The heart of this project lives in many places. It is transatlantic, multi-generational, and a piece of both investigative and personal journalism. It is an atypical thesis in its form, (an audio story), and in one of its main characters: myself. This unconventionality was a challenge that drew both excitement and frustration. As I traveled farther down the road of my reporting and production for this project, things often grew hazier instead of clearer. The weight of what my interviews contained and their significance for Ireland, American history, religion and my family was daunting—I wanted to do them all justice.

Author and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Alex Tizon said every person lives multiple stories, but that no writer can possibly encapsulate all of them in one piece. Instead, “we do the best we can, using everything we have—all our senses, intellect, and intuition—to choose the *right* story.”<sup>1</sup> That was my biggest challenge: figuring out how to weave all these threads, characters, and homes into the right narrative, one that resonated beyond its participants. My first move toward this goal was choosing audio as my medium. Audio can be one of the most emotionally honest forms of storytelling, and I think being able to hear the accent, tone or laugh of the nuns in my project adds a dimension not reachable with words. But all forms of storytelling have their limitations. Attention spans usually don’t allow for lengthy audio pieces, so within about a 40-minute time frame I had to strike a balance between a succinct, captivating narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Tizon, Alex. “Every Profile Is an Epic Story.” *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*, edited by Mark Kramer and Wendy Call, Penguin, 2007.

and sufficient context. The following background information details the history, methods, and intricacies behind my story in a way my audio piece could not.

### **Background Context: the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate**

The original Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate convent sits at the corner of Yucca and Anita Streets in Southeast San Antonio, Texas. A grand brick building with white trim and gothic windows, it is a beacon of the modest neighborhood, overlooking a maze of weathered one-story homes with worn fences and tiny dogs that yap incessantly as you pass. The old convent is flanked by an undeveloped grassy field that in the Texas spring blooms with vibrant yellow and pink flowers, bordered by train tracks crawling slowly north, the San Antonio skyline visible before the haze sets in. My audio project tells the life stories of two nuns at this convent, Sister Josephine “Jo” Murray, born 1933, and Sister Marion Murray, born 1938, who I refer to in my piece by her baptismal name,<sup>2</sup> Gabrielle.<sup>3</sup> Sister Jo and Sister Gabrielle are siblings from Culliagh,<sup>4</sup> County Roscommon, Ireland and also my great aunts.

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<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, sisters taking their final vows to become fully professed members of the convent are given new names taken from saints. But after the 1959 doctrinal modernization of the Catholic Church known as Vatican II, many nuns, including Sister Jo, reverted back to their baptismal names. Sister Marion kept her saint name because there was already another Gabrielle in the convent. Her family, however, have always used her given name.

<sup>3</sup> Pronounced like the masculine “Gabriel.”

<sup>4</sup> Pronounced “Cul-yuh.”





Figure 1: San Antonio Convent

The original Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate convent in the early 2000s.

The story of my great aunts' convent begins with its foundress, Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy (1833-1907), who was born in Cahirciveen, County Kerry and emigrated from Ireland to West Virginia with her father in 1845 to escape the hardships of the Great Famine—a potato blight and oppression by the British that killed about one million Irish and forced another two million to emigrate.<sup>5</sup> In West Virginia, the Healy family started a Sunday school where they taught reading and writing, including to African-American plantation slaves in the area.<sup>6</sup> Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy eventually settled and made a life for herself in the South, purchasing a ranch near

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<sup>5</sup> Mokyr, Joel. "Great Famine." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2017, [britannica.com](http://britannica.com).

<sup>6</sup> *Arena District / Eastside Community Plan*. (Government Document). 2003, [sanantonio.gov](http://sanantonio.gov), San Antonio.

Mathis, Texas with her husband, fellow Irish immigrant John Bernard Murphy. The couple had no children of their own, but over the course of their marriage adopted three orphaned girls, one of who was Hispanic.<sup>7</sup> Mr. Murphy died in 1884, and three years later 54-year-old widow Healy-Murphy relocated to San Antonio, a move that would set in motion a revelation, a mission, and a path to Texas for hundreds of young Irish women.

During Healy-Murphy's married years, the American Civil War waged for four years and ended in 1865 with the emancipation of some four million slaves. But full freedom for African-Americans was still not guaranteed as rampant racism, segregation and the antebellum passage of laws known as "black codes" prevented access to full citizen rights.<sup>8</sup> A nation that had relied on the work of slaves for more than two centuries<sup>9</sup> was woefully unprepared—especially in the South—to create space in society for people of color. For example, suddenly a huge segment of the population had the opportunity to receive a formal education, but had few established places to do so.<sup>10</sup>

To address this new need, American bishops in the South put out a call for Catholics to support the education of those who had been emancipated. A letter detailing this statement was read during a Sunday Mass in San Antonio attended by Healy-Murphy, who left church that day with a strong desire to help. In 1888, just one

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<sup>7</sup> "Healy-Murphy, Margaret Mary." *Texas State Historical Association*, The University of Texas at Austin, 15 June 2010.

<sup>8</sup> "Reconstruction." *History*, A&E Television Networks, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Public Broadcasting Service. "Slavery and the Making of America." *pbs.org*, Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> "Reconstruction and Its Aftermath." *African American Odyssey*, The Library of Congress. Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

year later, she opened the Saint Peter Claver School at the corner of Live Oak and Nolan Streets in San Antonio, its namesake a 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish priest who taught African slaves in Lisbon, Portugal.<sup>11</sup> Established by Healy-Murphy using money from her deceased husband's estate, Saint Peter Claver became the first free Catholic school and church for African-Americans in the State of Texas.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Margaret Mary Healy Murphy, Order Foundress." *The Daniel O'Connell Memorial Church*. Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Venable, Cecilia Gutierrez. "Saint Peter Claver Church, San Antonio, Texas (1888- )." *BlackPast*. Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.



Figure 2: Saint Peter Claver

A procession outside of Saint Peter Claver Church, dated 1903. The building pictured still stands today, the interior recently restored as a multi-use auditorium. The surrounding area is now occupied with newer buildings that serve as classrooms for the Healy-Murphy Center.

The school and its mission did not garner a warm welcome from the local white community—including the Klu Klux Klan—and Healy-Murphy dealt daily with resistance, prejudice, and criticism for her endeavor to create for African-Americans a place to get an education. The same bishops who sparked her initial pursuit gave Healy-Murphy another idea for how to sustain a reliable teaching staff under such negative pushback: become a nun and start a religious congregation dedicated to teaching. So in 1893, Healy-Murphy became Mother Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy, and along with three other nuns, established what is now the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary

Immaculate. Eager to grow her convent, Healy-Murphy made four recruiting trips back to Ireland in 1896, 1899, 1902, and 1906. She established a relationship with an existing convent in Mountbellew,<sup>13</sup> County Galway, which in subsequent generations sent most of its sisters to Texas to join Healy-Murphy in her mission.<sup>14</sup> A 1936 pamphlet advertising the Mountbellew convent and its Texas connection called for healthy Irish women between the ages of sixteen and thirty who had completed secondary education to join the mission of:

the education of youth, the care of the sick, aged and orphans. The Sisters do not exclude from their charity, any class or race of people, but their special work is, the education and evangelization of the thirteen million negros of the United States who do not belong to the Catholic Church.<sup>15</sup>

When asked about the “evangelization” component of this mission, Sister Jo and Sister Gabrielle say that by the time they arrived at the San Antonio convent in the 1950s, that was not a role they had within the schools. While Catholic teaching was central to their personal values and motivations, religion-specific outreach was more focused on their work within the already-Catholic Hispanic community. A majority of the African-American students they taught in their schools were Baptist, and there was no effort to convert them otherwise.

Healy-Murphy was not the only person in her family dedicated to racial activism. She may have been influenced by her cousin Daniel O’Connell, a member of British Parliament best known for winning Catholic Emancipation, campaigning for

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<sup>13</sup> Pronounced “mount-bell-yew.”

<sup>14</sup> “Our History.” Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate. Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Drossaerts, Arthur J. *Join the Missionary Sisters at St. Phillip's Convent*. 1936, Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate Heritage Room, San Antonio.

Irish Independence, and as a key voice in the opposition to slavery in both the United Kingdom and United States. O’Connell helped pass the Slave Emancipation Act of 1833, which aimed to eventually free all slaves in the British Empire,<sup>16</sup> and his opinions were praised by Frederick Douglass during the African-American abolitionist’s visit to Dublin in 1845. Douglass said of O’Connell: “his voice has made American slavery shake to its center.”<sup>17</sup> Today, Dublin’s main thoroughfare, O’Connell Street, is named after “The Great Emancipator” as many Irish call him.<sup>18</sup> These passionate feelings toward racial and social justice—though often not popular opinions of the era—became central to the mission of Healy-Murphy’s convent. Those in monastic life traditionally make vows of poverty, obedience and chastity,<sup>19</sup> but the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate—according to current and past mission statements—also promise to commit themselves to matters of injustice and inequality, to help the poor, marginalized, and “evaluate all our ministries through the lens of social justice.”<sup>20</sup>

These promises are evident not only in the reasons for establishing the congregation, but also in its continuing efforts as issues around race evolved in the South. By the 1950s, the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate had taught in and opened additional schools with similar missions in rural Texas, Dallas, Corpus Christi, Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Missouri and New York.<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that Catholic teaching clearly denounces racial discrimination,

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<sup>16</sup> “Emancipation.” *Black Presence*, The National Archives. Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Kinealy, Christine. “The Irish Abolitionist: Daniel O’Connell.” *Irish America Magazine*, Irish American, Sept. 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Sheehan, Sean; Levy, Patricia (2001). *Dublin Handbook: The Travel Guide*. Footprint Handbooks. p. 99

<sup>19</sup> “The Formation Process.” *Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate*. Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

<sup>20</sup> “Our Charism and Spirit.” *Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate*. Accessed 18 Mar. 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. “Our History.”

racism still saturated the church. Sister Gabrielle remembers clearly the moment she found out Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated. She was sitting in the teacher's lounge of a school in Crowley, Louisiana where she was stationed at the time, and when the news was announced, a priest walked in jubilantly exclaiming, "Yes! They got him!"<sup>22</sup> During those same years, Sister Jo was refused service at places like the post office and restaurants for the nuns' known involvement in desegregation, and remembers trying unsuccessfully to explain to a white parent at her school why everyone should be treated equally: "we're all human beings and we're all images of God," Sister Jo told the mother. "But she just found that hard to believe and to accept."<sup>23</sup>

The Catholic Church in many areas of the South was initially slow in its willingness to add a voice to the political climate. During the Civil Rights Movement, for example, Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen of Mobile, Alabama forbade his clergy from publicly challenging the state's segregation laws or from participating in protests for fear of angering the community's Catholic white population. It wasn't until 1958, four years into the movement that American Catholic bishops officially issued a statement condemning segregation and calling for racial justice.<sup>24</sup> Nuns have historically been more progressive than their male counterparts when it comes to issues of social justice, racial justice and women's rights, which has often put them at odds

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<sup>22</sup> Murray, Gabrielle. Interview. By Emma Decker. Nov. 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Murray, Jo. Interview. By Emma Decker. Nov. 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Moore, Andrew S. "Catholicism and the Civil Rights Movement." *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, Alabama Humanities Foundation, 2007.

with the Vatican and other church officials.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of the opinions of the clergy, the sisters from San Antonio had always stood at the sides of their students not only in the classroom, but also on the streets. Similar to the famously photographed nuns who marched in the 1965 Selma to Montgomery protests,<sup>26</sup> the sisters in San Antonio participated in civil rights marches in the cities where they were stationed, and later helped to desegregate the schools where they taught.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 3: March from Selma, 1965

Nuns in Alabama marching hand-in-hand with other civil rights protesters after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called for support from religious communities.

Accelerating in numbers at the turn of the century, nuns soon became the face of Catholicism in American society. They built and taught in schools wherever they went, ran hundreds of hospitals, and while many other American women were on track for

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<sup>25</sup> Simon, Stephanie. "Vatican Crackdown On Nuns Over Social Justice Issues, Women Ordination." *Huffington Post*, 20 Apr. 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Murray, Paul. "54 miles to freedom: Catholics were prominent in 1965 Selma march." *National Catholic Reporter*, 7 Mar. 2015.



lives of domesticity or oppression, nuns were free from these restraints and often became influential leaders in the communities they served. “These woman had an awful lot of power at a time when under secular auspices, you couldn’t even dream of it,” said Notre Dame American Studies professor Kathleen Sprows Cummings in a 2013 interview with the Boston Globe. Although many women initially entered religious life because of a lack of career options for young women at the time, “There’s a way in which entering the convent was an opportunity to be a pioneer.”<sup>28</sup> This paradox and the extent of nuns’ influence on American society has only recently started to be recognized in academic circles. In another interview with the Globe, nun and sociologist Patricia Wittberg attributes this neglect to the fact that “Most Catholic history has been written by men who ignored women, and most women’s history has been written by people who were prejudiced against Catholics.”<sup>29</sup>

While their role with African-Americans was a historically relevant highlight of their work, the mission of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate was not dedicated to a single race. Many sisters were recruited from or worked in Texas’ Hispanic communities, taught in all-white schools, or went on international missions. Sister Gabrielle spent 19 years working in a rural community in Mexico, and later in life used her bilingual fluency to do prison ministry with Spanish-speaking inmates in San Antonio. Sister Jo, beginning when she was age 76, spent a total of six years in Ghana and Zambia as a nurse and a teacher. Healy-Murphy’s mission and original school still exists today as the Healy-Murphy Center, an alternative high school that serves

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<sup>27</sup> Murray, Jo, and Gabrielle Murray. Interview. By Emma Decker. 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Graham, Ruth. “What American nuns built.” *The Boston Globe*, 24 Feb. 2013.

minority, at-risk youth and teen parents who have fallen through the cracks of San Antonio's public school system. Students at the Healy-Murphy Center can get a high school diploma or GED, and an adjacent building offers childcare for over 100 kids under age five who have teenage parents attending the school<sup>30</sup> (Texas has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the nation).<sup>31</sup> The Healy-Murphy Center resides on the same grounds once occupied by the Saint Peter Claver School—the original building with its gabled roof and tall gothic windows has been restored and repurposed as a multi-use auditorium.<sup>32</sup> A few of the younger nuns still teach classes at the school, while others serve on the Board of Directors.<sup>33</sup>

In the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate's prime, the convent was a bustling epicenter of young Irish women beginning new lives in Texas dedicated to God as teachers, at their peak 250 strong in the 1960s. Once they arrived, novitiates<sup>34</sup> were housed in attic dorms during the summer that turned to saunas in the Texas heat—though they speak fondly of their teenage summer nights spent chatting of their new life. Today, about 70 nuns remain, and the median age of the order is 77. These numbers are not unique to San Antonio. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of nuns in the U.S. has been in steady decline since the 1960s—a 72 percent drop in the last 50 years, compared to a 35 percent drop in priests.<sup>35</sup> A 2014 study by Georgetown University found the number of “women religious” in the United States

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Graham.

<sup>30</sup> *Healy-Murphy Center*. 2015, [www.healymurphy.org](http://www.healymurphy.org).

<sup>31</sup> Martin, Brittney. "Bexar County sees decline in teen birth rate, but percentage of teens with multiple children remains the same." *San Antonio Express-News*, 14 Sept. 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Watson, Douglas. Interview. By Emma Decker. 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. *Healy-Murphy Center*.

<sup>34</sup> A period of training and preparation before one takes their final vows.

was just under 50,000, and within that number more sisters were over the age of 90 than under the age of 60.<sup>36</sup> An article from the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* speculates that one of the main reasons for this decline is that the “expansion of educational and occupational opportunities for women reduces the attractiveness of Catholic orders.”<sup>37</sup> This was a sentiment echoed in my interviews with the Murray sisters. Growing up, they saw becoming a nun as one of only a few options available to them in rural Ireland.

The nuns in San Antonio are not oblivious to the reality of their dwindling numbers. They have a succession plan in place for their school and their convent, and many are at peace with their trajectory. “If God wants us to continue in a different way that’s ok with me,” says Sister Jo of the future. She pauses and then chuckles “I’ll be gone, I’ll be in the grave!”<sup>38</sup> No longer able to fill the halls of their original home, the sisters recently sold the convent to a local social service agency treating ex-convicts, and built a smaller more modern convent across the street to better fit their size and elderly needs. The original attic had been a storage room for a long time. There are no new girls. Their way of life is slowly and literally dying out.

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<sup>35</sup> Lipka, Michael. “U.S. nuns face shrinking numbers and tensions with the Vatican.” *Pew Research Center*. 8 Aug. 2014. Web.

<sup>36</sup> Berrelleza, S.J, et al. "Population Trends Among Religious Institutes of Women." *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate*, Fall 2014, Georgetown University.

<sup>37</sup> Ebaugh, Helen Rose, Jon Lorence, and Janet Saltzman Chafetz. “The Growth and Decline of the Population of Catholic Nuns Cross-Nationally, 1960-1990: A Case of Secularization as Social Structural Change.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35.2 (1996): 171-183. *JSTOR*. Web.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Murray, Jo.

### **Background Context: the Murray and Mahon families**

The life stories of my great aunts, the Murray sisters, serve as the backbone of my audio project. Sister Jo and Sister Gabrielle Murray grew up on a dairy farm in rural Ireland with their parents and nine siblings. Their family was devoutly Catholic, but not in a way that was unique to the country or the time period. Both sisters remember religion in their childhood as a humble, gentle influence that permeated the household but was never forced upon them; they said the rosary every night, went to church on Sundays, and their father prayed for the cows if one ever got sick. Inspired by the nuns at her primary school, Sister Jo decided at a young age that religious service was a path she wanted to take, and her younger sister Gabrielle followed suit a few years later. The youngest sister in the family, Ann, also pursued religious life, but left the profession before taking her final vows. She immigrated to the US where she married and raised a family. For large families in Ireland at the time, one or two children going into religious life was not uncommon, and also a way of life the Murray sisters remember thinking was exciting and honorable—they described the habit-clad nuns they knew as “beautiful.” At age 18 each entered the profession and was sent to a nearby convent in Mountbellew, County Galway, where they had visited their aunt, a nun there, as children. The relationship between the Mountbellew convent and Mother Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy was no secret, and new recruits at Mountbellew knew that it was just a stopping point on an inevitable journey to San Antonio. Within months of joining the convent in 1951, Sister Jo was standing at the railing of a transatlantic ship, headed west.



Figure 4: Sisters in Texas

Sister Jo (left), and Sister Gabrielle in front of the original San Antonio convent in 1957. Sister Jo, in the full habit, is at this time a fully professed nun, while Sister Gabrielle has only recently immigrated and has yet to take her final vows.

Prior to this project, I had only met Sister Jo and Sister Gabrielle twice—once in Ireland as an infant and then again as an eight-year-old traveling through Texas with my family. Although we are related, I did not expect my audio story to become so personal, initially envisioning this as a summer project solely about nuns and their futures. But

after hours of interviews and multiple trips to Texas and Ireland, I realized that the threads of Sister Jo and Sister Gabrielle's stories were not singular to them, but spanned four generations of the family: from their mother, to my mother, to me. The big task then was to choose what theme would connect these women in a way that made sense to them, to the story and to history. I decided on *choices*: how strong women in my family have made them and what has followed. The choice I focused on for the Murray sisters was their decision to leave home and enter an American-affiliated convent. During these conversations, I discovered a generation I had not expected would have a role in this story: their mother. Josephine Murray raised eleven children on the Culligh farm—a place not reached by electricity until the late 1940s. She had a second grade education, read the newspaper every day, and desired for her children the sorts of adventures and experiences she was never able to have. As detailed in some emotional moments in the audio piece, Mrs. Murray was keenly aware of the different paths her daughters' decisions could create, and gave them the gracious gifts of choice, transparency, and letting go.

One of the reasons Sister Jo and Sister Gabrielle became nuns was because in rural Ireland at the time, options were slim—standard futures include being a farmer's wife, teacher, nurse, civil servant or a nun. While many might initially view monastic life as one of sacrifice, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to late 1960s, it often worked the opposite. The Murray sisters say that in retrospect, their ultimate selection and immigration to the United States provided more opportunity, freedom, and adventure than most women in the world had at that time. According to American Studies professor Kathleen Sprows Cummings, a Catholic woman during that time period, “had

far more opportunities within church structures than outside them for meaningful work.”<sup>39</sup> Free from the obligations of marriage and children, Sister Jo and Sister Gabrielle were able to live a life of relative independence, traveled and lived internationally, and received college educations paid for and encouraged by the convent. Sister Jo has a bachelor’s degree in English and philosophy from St. Mary’s University as well as a degree in nursing from the University of Texas, San Antonio. Sister Gabrielle has a bachelor’s in history from St. Mary’s University and a master’s in formative spirituality from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. This inclination to break the mold was not unique to the Murrays who became nuns. Of Mrs. Murray’s eleven children, only one of them became a farmer (he took over the family dairy, today run by my cousin and in its fifth generation). The rest fanned out across Ireland, the U.S. and England. All became professionals—whether it was as a nurse, teacher, banker, mechanic, or in my grandmother’s case, a businesswoman.

My grandmother, Veronica Mahon *née* Murray (1928-1995), was the older sister of Sister Jo and Sister Gabrielle. She and my grandfather Frank Mahon settled 20 miles south of the Culliagh farm in Tiernascragh,<sup>40</sup> County Galway—another rural west-Ireland farming community—and ran a small grocery and hardware, “Mahon’s,” while raising five girls. Veronica died of cancer at age 67, two weeks after I was born. I had always been told by my family that if you combined Sister Jo and Sister Gabriel into one person, you would get Veronica. So sitting in the chair across from the nuns during our interviews, it felt like the empty space between them was one of the last amalgamations of my grandmother. My interviews with the nuns were not just a history

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Graham.

lesson, but also maybe the closest I will ever get to her; for the first time I heard from women with whom Veronica shares features, mannerisms and a childhood about who my grandmother was not as a mother or a wife, but as a sister.

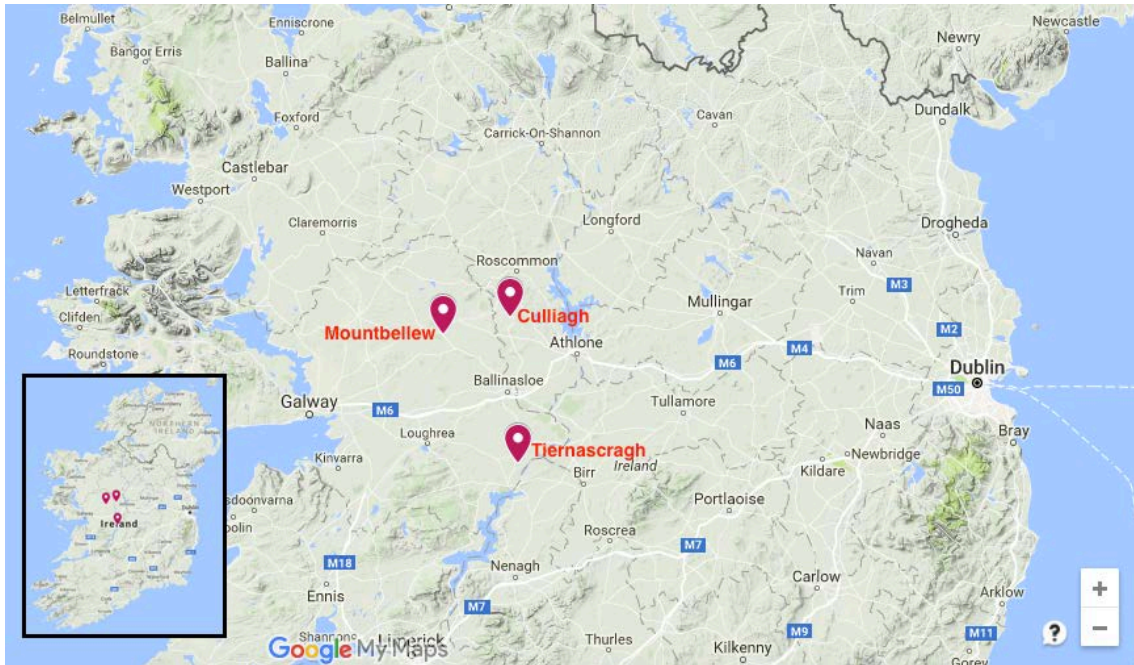


Figure 5: Map of Ireland

This map shows the locations of Culliagh, County Roscommon where the Murray family has their farm; Mountbellew, County Galway where the convent the sisters first entered is located; and Tiernascragh, County Galway where my mother grew up.

Ireland has the highest cumulative emigration rate of any European country for the past two centuries.<sup>41</sup> While this has given the island of 6 million people a global community of roughly 70 million who claim Irish ancestry, it is still viewed by Irish families and Irish government as a bittersweet loss—mostly of young people “with their energy, innovation and capacity to drive change, though for many of those who leave, it

<sup>40</sup> Pronounced “ter-nas-crah.”

<sup>41</sup> “Ireland In The World - The Irish Abroad.” *Ireland Information*. Accessed 25 Mar. 2017.



opens up a world of new opportunities.”<sup>42</sup> Like Sister Jo and Sister Gabrielle, my own mother, Marie Mahon, is also an immigrant to the United States and was interviewed for my project. My mom was the first in her generation of the family to emigrate, but her choice was different from the nuns’ because it wasn’t one she realized she was making. When Marie graduated from secondary school, the family home and shop had just burned to the ground in a fire and she was needed to take care of the family and younger sisters as her parents tried to rebuild their livelihood. This was more than a full-time endeavor and eclipsed any thinking about higher education or other future prospects. If you had asked my mom as a child what she wanted to be when she grew up, she would say a farmer’s wife. That’s what she was surrounded by and that’s all she knew. But at 17, helping her family after the fire left her in a rural limbo with no clear path forward. Her parents thought a *brief* vacation to visit an aunt in Tacoma, Washington would be a good way to jumpstart their daughter.

My mom returned to Ireland five years later, a tall American boy from Chicago in tow and a bachelor’s degree in social work under her belt. A psychology class she excelled in at Tacoma Community College made her realize she could handle higher education, that her mind had value, and that college in America was accessible, supportive, and completely different from the harsh experience she had with school in Ireland. She got a student visa and eventually graduated from the University of Montana in 1985 and married my dad, Doug Decker, at home in Tiernascragh that summer. But the Irish economy had taken a turn for the worse in the mid-80s, and with

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<sup>42</sup> Ireland Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *Global Irish: Ireland's Diaspora Policy*. Mar. 2015, dfa.ie

unemployment rates nearing 20 percent,<sup>43</sup> there were few job prospects in Ireland for my parents. They returned to the States, and my mom became an immigrant forever.<sup>44</sup>

My own piece of the story has been the most challenging to integrate into the project. Following the 1995 death of my grandmother Veronica, I spent the first months of my life at home in Tiernascragh with my parents. It was important to my mom that her home become my home too, and since then I have spent nearly every summer in Ireland with my family—running through my grandfather’s field, playing in the Murray farm’s turf shed, and eating my fill of Irish sweets. Despite the 18 summers I’ve now spent in Ireland, a pilgrimage and home that became integral to my childhood, before this project I had never before taken a critical look at my family, its history, our ties to the United States and what it has all meant.

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<sup>43</sup> "Ireland Unemployment Rate." *Trading Economics*, tradingeconomics.com. Accessed 15 Apr. 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Mahon, Marie. Interview. By Emma Decker. Feb. 2017.



Figure 6: Marie and Emma in Ireland

My mom, Marie Mahon, and me, age 16 months, at home in Tiernascragh during the summer of 1996, my second trip.

As I reported this story, the presence of strong Irish women in the country's history and in my own family stood out. For example, what sets apart the Irish diaspora is that it was largely female. Other immigrant populations arriving in the United States were mostly men who came to pave the way for their families or who eventually returned to their native country. But by 1900, more than 60 percent of the Irish who had immigrated to the United States were single women. This gender disparity within the Irish diaspora of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries can trace its roots back to the aftermath of the potato famine of 1845-1852.

There are a couple key changes in Irish society post-famine that promoted the mass emigration of females. A reorganization of land ownership and agricultural

practices in Ireland resulted in larger farming estates and less land available to be inherited by marrying couples looking to sustain a family. So by 1851, 39 percent of women in Ireland between the ages of 21 and 34 were unmarried, and with bleak economic opportunities for those who remained single, emigration offered new prospects. At the same time, an increase in the Catholic Church's power after the famine—in part a push-back against the Protestant English who had colonized the country—marginalized women through its often oppressive and sexist structures. However, the church also encouraged education in the schools it helped run, which drastically increased literacy rates for women (eclipsing numbers of literate Irish men by 1900). A population of literate women meant they were able to read letters from others who had emigrated, understand the opportunities outside of Ireland, and have the courage and skillset to leave home.<sup>45</sup> The combination of these and other changes both reduced the status of Irish women in society and gave them an incentive to seek economic, familial, and personal autonomy elsewhere.<sup>46</sup> They had “had enough of their repressive native culture. They picked up and they came to stay. Then they sent for their sisters.”<sup>47</sup>

My interview process uncovered many things about the women in my family that I had never known or even thought to ask about. For example, I had no idea the extent to which my great aunts were involved in the Civil Rights Movement, or that my mom had no profound reason for emigrating. Their experiences make me wonder

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<sup>45</sup> Miller, Kirby A. *Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class, and Transatlantic Migration*. Field Day Publications, 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Flanagan, Mackenzie S., "Irish Women's Immigration to the United States After the Potato Famine, 1860-1900" (2015). Senior Theses and Capstone Projects. Paper 42.

<sup>47</sup> Barrett Price, Susan. "Women: Irish Emigration's Bold Leading Edge." *Mad in Pursuit*, 17 Mar. 2005.

what I would have done in their shoes. Would I have been brave enough or confident enough in my beliefs to stand up to 1960s racism in the South? Would I have sacrificed my home to get an education in a different country, knowing the financial and emotional burden it would place on my family? I am at roughly the same point in my life that Sister Jo, Sister Gabrielle, and my mom were when they left home, and now I too have choices to make. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote “Every man is a quotation from all his ancestors.” I don’t know what my version of a 1950s westbound ship will be, but hopefully when the next deep end comes, like the other women in my family, I’ll jump.

## Method Analysis of Current Journalistic Works

### Work Pertaining Specifically to Nuns

There are many books, TV shows, and movies about nuns, but I have not been able to find any audio stories produced by leading radio programs with nuns as the sole narrative focus. The closest I have found is a 2010 story by *Radiolab* called “Fate and Fortune,” which uses an Alzheimer’s study on 678 nuns from the School Sisters of Notre Dame<sup>48</sup> to explore the mysteries of human aging.<sup>49</sup> The podcast talks about how the regulation, careful record keeping and seclusion of religious groups makes them ideal for epidemiologists—in a group of women who have lived, eaten, and grown old together in the relatively same environment their entire lives, why do some age gracefully while others completely lose their memory?<sup>50</sup> Although a nun serves as a main interview subject for one segment of this three-part episode, the other two stories do not deal with monastic life. A lack of projects about nuns done in my chosen medium sets my thesis apart, but there have been multiple works in other formats that have informed the way I pursued my project.

Many of the books I found on nuns deal with their affinity for social activism, a theme I found central in my research in Texas as well. However, during my interviews with the sisters in San Antonio, they were sometimes brief or surface-level in their answers, including those about their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. I partially attribute this to fading memory, humility, and their tendency to downplay

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<sup>48</sup> Snowdon, DA. “Healthy aging and dementia: findings from the Nun Study.” *Ann Intern Med*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2 Sept. 2003, pp. 450-4. *NCBI*.

<sup>49</sup> Radiolab. *Fate and Fortune*. WNYC, 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Snowdon, David. *Aging with Grace*. Bantam Books, 2001.

achievements. But I think it's also difficult, even in retrospect, to fully grasp how ones own actions impacted a complex web of historical events. This part of the sisters' lives and the intricacies behind it were made considerably clearer to me by history professor Amy L. Koehlinger's book *The New Nuns*. The book investigates religious sisters' role in racial justice and religious reform in the 1960s. Koehlinger attempts to demythologize Catholic nuns, taking common stereotypes developed from the representation of nuns in popular culture (medieval, strict, subservient to a patriarchal religious structure) and replacing them with "a more complex representation of their lives in a particularly thick historical moment...and the ways that immersion in black communities changed their ideas about what it meant to be a sister." The book chronicles the Catholic sisters' formation of a "racial apostolate" during the Civil Rights Movement, woven in between Koehlinger's realization that nuns are not sheltered, naïve or passive religious figures, but human beings—"as complex and contradictory, vulnerable and resilient, petty and kind-hearted as anyone I'd known."<sup>51</sup>

Koehlinger finds that a nun's deep religious beliefs do not leave her blind or immature, but rather inspire a fierce devotion and advocacy for those who are suffering. She says this characterization seemed not an anomaly to the particular nuns she became close to in her research, but was rather symptomatic of an entire generation of religious sisters who entered the profession between 1900 and 1960. During this time, multiple facets of a nuns' world were shifting: the role of race and women in American society was evolving, the Catholic Church was preparing for and adapting to Vatican II—the

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<sup>51</sup> Koehlinger, Amy L. "Demythologizing Catholic Women Religious in the 1960s." *The Journal of Southern Religion*.

abrupt doctrinal modernization of Catholicism to what we know it as today<sup>52</sup>—and monastic life’s place in society was also in question. During this turbulent period, large numbers of sisters were inspired to abandon their traditional assignments in schools and hospitals to join the racial justice movement. Motivations for this shift in mission are varied. Koehlinger says many Catholic nuns who joined the movement “were eloquent and even passionate in their explanations of why racial justice was vital to American society.” But she notes that these missions also furthered other more intimate motivations: they offered an escape from rigid convent life and allowed the nuns to feel “closer to a people they believed had been made holy through their suffering.”<sup>53</sup>

### **Audio Journalism Methods**

The first transmission of speech and music by radio was achieved in 1906 by Canadian inventor Reginald Fessenden.<sup>54</sup> It was Christmas Eve, and instead of broadcasting over the airwaves the usual “dit-dahs” of Morse code—the language of radio at the time—Fessenden played and sang a verse of “O Holy Night” on the violin, read from the Bible and wished everyone a Merry Christmas. His broadcast was mostly heard by ships in the vicinity. Today, the landscape of radio is much more vast and diverse, and has evolved with technology. Radio’s most recent adaption to the digital age comes in the form of podcasts—radio programs that can be downloaded onto iPods or smart phones to be listened to at any time; the word “podcast” comes from the

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<sup>52</sup> Teicher, Jordan G. "Why Is Vatican II So Important?" *NPR*, 10 Oct. 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Koehlinger, Amy L. *The New Nuns: racial justice and religious reform in the 1960s*. Harvard University Press, 2007.

<sup>54</sup> Federal Communications Commission. "A Short History of Radio." *fcc.gov*, Winter 2004.



combination of the words iPod and broadcast,<sup>55</sup> first termed in 2004 by technology journalist Ben Hammersley.<sup>56</sup> After Apple made the podcast app standard on their devices, the market took off. According to a 2016 study by Edison Research, 57 million Americans listen to podcasts monthly.<sup>57</sup> Podcasts' popularity is multifaceted: they have fairly low production costs, don't require a slot on radio airspace, give listeners the reins on when and where they want to listen to content, and allow for a more personal, creative, niche platform on which to tell stories. Additionally, podcasts are not under the jurisdiction of the Federal Communications Commission, the governing body that regulates radio, TV and satellite communication in the United States.<sup>58</sup>

There are three podcasts that inspired and informed how I pursued my project structurally: *This American Life*, *Radiolab* and *Serial*. *This American Life* from WBEZ Chicago began in 1995 and is hosted by Ira Glass. For me, *This American Life* is the pioneer of creative audio storytelling. Their hour-long episodes are broken into acts, center around a weekly theme, and are full of personality from both the host and his interviewees that is often discouraged in traditional journalism. Part of the beauty of how Glass tells his stories is that the theme is not always something obviously newsworthy. The stories are simple, pedestrian, human, and often unintentionally introspective and contemplative. I used episodes from *This American Life* as maps for how to weave together my narrative voice, nun interviews and ambient sound.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> "podcast". *The Free On-line Dictionary of Computing*. Denis Howe. 25 Mar. 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Crampton, Caroline. "In the age of podcasts, the era of communal listening is over." *New Statesman* [United Kingdom], 18 Feb. 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Greenberg, Julia. "Podcasts Are Saving NPR." *Wired*, 12 June 2015.

<sup>58</sup> "What We Do." *Federal Communications Commission*, fcc.gov. Accessed 25 Mar. 2017.

<sup>59</sup> *This American Life*. Chicago Public Media, thisamericanlife.org. Accessed 25 Mar. 2017.

*Radiolab* from WNYC began its first official season in 2005 and is hosted by Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich. They describe their show as one about curiosity, “where sound illuminates ideas, and the boundaries blur between science, philosophy, and human experience.”<sup>60</sup> *Radiolab* is a master of sound design. The show uses a lot of ambient and natural sound to illustrate points and keep the episodes from being an hour of solid talking. Although the final product is just audio, it feels like a story in 3D—it transports you, something I’m hoping to achieve to some extent with my piece. I also look up to *Radiolab* journalists for the way they approach stories. They have a way of storytelling that takes a standard narrative, turns it on its head, and makes something new. Take, for instance, an episode they did in 2014 about elevator close-door buttons. *Radiolab* takes the simplicity and ubiquitousness of a button and turns it into an exploration of humanity. Buttons, they say in the episode description, “are a portal to power, freedom, and destruction. Today we thread together tales of taking charge of the little things in life, of fortunes made and lost, and of the ease with which the world can end.”<sup>61</sup>

The third podcast that inspired my piece is a spin-off of *This American Life* called *Serial*, hosted by Sarah Koenig. A 2014 episodic podcast that follows the same real-life murder mystery for 12 episodes,<sup>62</sup> *Serial* became an audio and pop-culture sensation. It is now the fastest podcast to ever reach five million downloads,<sup>63</sup> and is the most downloaded podcast ever at 200 million and counting. What impressed me about

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<sup>60</sup> *Radiolab*. WNYC Radio, radiolab.org. Accessed 25 Mar. 2017.

<sup>61</sup> “Buttons Not Buttons.” *Radiolab*, WNYC Radio, 12 Dec. 2014, radiolab.org.

<sup>62</sup> *Serial*. WBEZ + This American Life, Oct. 2014, serialpodcast.org.

<sup>63</sup> Dredge, Stuart. “Serial podcast breaks iTunes records as it passes 5m downloads and streams.” *The Guardian*, 18 Nov. 2014.

*Serial* was not necessarily the content, but the way Koenig chose to tell *her* story within *the* story. Like my own project, Koenig allows herself to become a part of the narrative—she’s transparent about the fact that she’s not an omniscient narrator, but rather a journalist who doesn’t have all the answers. She often includes recordings of herself candidly questioning the trajectory, conclusions and complexities of the story. This departure from a polished script read from a recording booth makes the listener feel like they are on a journey with the storyteller. It is raw, real and captivating.<sup>64</sup>

Podcasts are having their moment. There’s a lot of money to be made in the industry right now and the niche is flourishing. Ira Glass of *This American Life* suspects the bubble might only last a few more years, but that the impact will be lasting. This kind of storytelling is powerful because there’s an intimacy to radio that words don’t have. It can lead to more poignant stories and better relationships and transparency between the listener and the journalist. And because of this freedom and focus, it’s often more fun to report and produce; says Glass on how to craft a radio story: “the single most important thing—after getting the facts right—you can be doing is noticing what’s fun to you and sounds interesting.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Koenig, Sarah. "Binge-Worthy Journalism: Backstage with the Creators of Serial." Seattle Theatre Group, 17 Mar. 2017, Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, Portland.

<sup>65</sup> Glass, Ira. Interview. By Emma Decker et al. 22 Apr. 2017.

## **Method Analysis of My Approach**

### **My Approach to Nuns**

The amount of access to monastic communities such as the one I reported in varies. Some are more private than others, many no longer exist. In a cloistered convent, for example, interviews with the sisters have to be done from behind a bared partition. My reporting is unique in this way because as a family member, I was granted immediate and unconditional access into the lives of the sisters in Texas. This situation made it more comfortable for me to ask tough questions and focus on reporting and observing rather than building a relationship with my subjects from scratch.

I took two separate one-week trips to the convent in San Antonio. One in the spring of 2015 to conduct my first interviews, and another 18 months later in the fall of 2016 to do follow-up interviews and take photos. During each day at the convent, I would set aside two hours to conduct interviews with my great aunts, and spend the rest of my time shadowing their day: mass, meals, school visits, movie nights, reading novels in the sun on the patio, or on one occasion a late-night glass of sherry accompanied by a few other nightgown-clad sisters and a hearty round of the Irish national anthem.

In the summer of 2015 during my annual trip to Ireland, I spent a day retracing Sister Jo and Sister Gabrielle's paths before they emigrated. I visited the family farm in Culliagh for a cup of tea and a walk through the sheds, fields, and dairy with my recorder so I could collect natural sound to use in the audio piece. The original cottage the nuns grew up in is still there, and a rummage through a bedroom dresser turned up

old family photos and news clippings I scanned to use for the project. I drove from the farm 20 minutes west to the Mountbellew convent where the Murray sisters first entered. Unfortunately, I was not able to enter the now-abandoned building and could only peer in through the windows. It sits landlocked between school and bank-owned land. According to a nun I found in the halls of the neighboring school, restoration plans were abandoned during the 2008 market crash. Thieves stripped the building of its copper and roofing, and subsequent water damage rendered it structurally dangerous. It has been left—in a rather warped, poetic way—to age until it is no more.

While it's traditionally not practiced for a journalist to have their own role in the story, technology and my biological relationship to the nuns change this norm. Because I am telling this story using audio, you can hear my voice. Unlike a written piece, it would be disorienting if my words did not have an identity or personality. Even in interviews on a hard news radio program, the format makes it nearly impossible for journalists to have the same anonymity one would have when writing a news story. Take for example Ari Shapiro or Audie Cornish from NPR's *All Things Considered*, or Dave Miller from Oregon Public Broadcasting's *Think Out Loud*,<sup>66</sup> daily listeners know these voices and often feel a connection to the hosts in a way they wouldn't with a daily news reporter from *The New York Times*. Additionally, including the more personal aspects of my reporting makes this project a significantly more meaningful piece. When I would pitch this story to professors or reporters, usually their eyes didn't light up until I mentioned I was related to the subjects. Anyone can write a story about nuns dying

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<sup>66</sup> NPR. [npr.org](http://npr.org). Accessed 10 Apr. 2017.

out, but only *I* could have the kind of access required tell a story that broke beneath the statistical and emotional surface.

### **Audio Journalism Methods**

I recorded all my interviews using a Tascam DR-100. For the interviews during my first trip to Texas, I interviewed both Sister Jo and Sister Gabriel in a room together using the Tascam's built-in microphone. For the interviews on my second trip, I interviewed each sister separately and had Lavalier microphones clipped to both the interviewer and interviewee. My initial method of interviewing was inspired by a style employed by an NPR program called *StoryCorps*, an expert in the art of the conversation interview. *StoryCorps* reporters travel around the country with a mobile recording booth to provide a place for friends, family, or any two people with a story to tell to sit and talk it out. The interviewer's voice is not included in the final cut, and the banter back and forth between the participants results in an often-emotional story—for many it's the first time they've been prompted to openly talk about the chosen topic with each other.<sup>67</sup> I think my attempt at this was successful, but my audio quality suffered. Because I did not have the nuns or myself individually attached to a microphone, all the voices were recorded at slightly different volumes, and the more talkative sister dominated the conversation. It was suggested to me by former NPR foreign correspondent Eric Weiner that I conduct my interviews on the second trip separately. This allowed me to have more control over the audio quality, level of interaction with each sister, and more options for post-production layering and cutting. I

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<sup>67</sup> *Storycorps*. [storycorps.org](http://storycorps.org). Accessed 10 Apr. 2017.

asked each nun the same set of questions, and could now weave their different or similar answers together more evenly in the final product.

After each trip to Texas, I transcribed my interviews using a manual transcription program called Transcriba so that I had time-stamped documents of all my content. This helped immensely when I was writing my script for the final audio piece, which I put together using the digital audio workstation Adobe Audition. The final audio piece is a 40-minute story that weaves together all my different interviews, which I hope to get published on a podcast or radio program in the U.S. or Ireland.

### **Difficulties and How I Solved Them**

My entire thesis process took nearly two and a half years—plenty of time to make a fair amount of mistakes, procrastinate, and worry that my approach would not result in the vision I had in my head of the final product. One of the biggest interview difficulties I had was getting the nuns to open up to me about their feelings and emotions—to go beyond the facts. The Irish can be a deeply private group of people. Profound thinkers but sometimes surface-level conversationalists, especially when it comes to being introspective out loud. Combine this with the humbleness that comes with being a nun, and I found it hard to get Sister Jo and Sister Gabrielle to talk frankly about their accomplishments, emotions, failures and regrets. I often had to ask the same question over and over again in different ways to get them to go beyond a stereotypical answer. I think trust and our growing relationship were factors here—the interviews I did on my second trip to San Antonio were much more fruitful in content than my first. On one hand, I was a year and a half older, more experienced, and had simply become a better journalist and asked better questions. I also think the nuns, having gone through it

once before, were less apprehensive about the interview process and more comfortable and trusting of me. Though sometimes difficult, the process was rewarding for both parties. Their answers often began with something like “well, you know, no one has ever asked me that before,” or “now I haven’t thought of that in years, that’s a memory I didn’t even know I still had!”

On a smaller but ubiquitous note, I spent all my interviews in a race with the air conditioning, which my sensitive microphones picked up and amplified hideously. All the rooms in the convent are connected to a humming central A/C with no way to turn it completely off. So at the beginning of each interview, I would turn the heat threshold dial for our room all the way up, but the automatized system would eventually flick on after about two hours, and the interview would be forced to conclude.

Another difficulty during this process was knowing how often I should have my Tascam recording in situations that were not a formal interview. In the podcasts I mention in the previous section, they often utilize recordings of the in-betweens—the brainstorming sessions, hallway conversations and random interactions—to incorporate human, unscripted moments into the narrative. There were many times when I was eating dinner with the nuns or walking with them somewhere and they said something that I immediately wish I had recorded, but by then the moment was then gone. But you never know when that’s going to happen, so does one just collect hours and hours of tape in case a gem comes along? That was a balance I was never quite able to perfect. In a similar vein, I also think I should have done more “thought diaries” during my reporting process, where at the end of the day I record my thoughts of what happened. This would have helped during production when I was putting everything together,



because some of the interviews and interactions at this point are more than two years old, and I'd forgotten my observations. The downside of audio is that there is just *so much* content that is not user-friendly to browse. There is no "command+find" function to get right to where you want in a clip, you either have to transcribe everything, (which takes three times the amount of time the interview took), or have the foresight to write down timestamps when something significant happened in real time, which I didn't do.

During the script-writing and production of the piece, I really struggled with how to put everything I had collected together. I had over nine hours of interviews with threads reaching out in a dozen different directions. There are so many facets to the nuns' stories, and there was no way to include all of them. I narrowed it down by choosing the segments that had the best audio quality, cutting out anything that strayed too far from central themes, and enlisting friends to listen to the piece and tell me which parts interested them the most.

I know that in the future when I am a more experienced journalist I will look back on my mistakes or missteps in this piece and cringe. While it's all part of the learning process, it can also be frustrating as a young journalist to feel like you're not good enough for your own story. In an interview about storytelling techniques, *This American Life's* Ira Glass says this acknowledgment shouldn't garner dissatisfaction, but rather confidence on where you're headed. Most people who do creative work, he says, get into it because they have something: good taste. But there's a gap between having good taste, and making great work that lives up to that taste.

For the first couple years that you're making stuff, says Glass, your work kind of sucks.

“But your *taste*, the thing that got you into the game, your taste is still *killer*. And your taste is good enough that you can tell that what you're making is kind of a disappointment to you.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Glass, Ira, narrator. *Ira Glass on Storytelling*. Adapted by David Liu, 6 June 2011. *Vimeo*.

## Closing Thoughts



Figure 7: Emma and the Nuns

Sister Jo (left), myself, and Sister Gabrielle during my first trip to Texas in the spring of 2015. This photo is taken in the same location as the one in figure 4.

The story of these nuns is novel because few have had the chance to tell it, and captivating because it is a unique way of life and set of historical incidents. But it also contains universal experiences: leaving home, making choices, and moving on. Before reporting this story, I had never asked my mom directly why she had immigrated; never wondered what drives someone to become a nun or how a mother feels when they release what little control they have of their child's future. And maybe my piece will prompt listeners to do the same; what questions haven't they asked? What choices shaped their lives?

My Irish life and my American life have always been very compartmentalized, with very little crossover outside of my family's kitchen. Growing up, my friends always knew I would go to Ireland every summer and that my mom had an accent—they thought those things were “cool”—but there was no real acknowledgment, curiosity or conversation from them or from myself about how that experience had shaped me. It wasn't really until I started this project that my two worlds collided. I spent a lot of time during this thesis process asking nuns, professors, experts, Irish friends and Google a lot of questions. But it turned out I also had some for myself—one of the many great consequences of journalism: when the mirror you hold up to the world turns around.

Thus, my thesis became much more than a fulfillment of all my graduation requirements. It is the sincerest thank you note and longest love letter I've ever written—to my parents, to the Mahon and Murray families, to my grandfather's field and to the Galway Bay stones we'd slip into our pockets to bring home. While putting together my audio story, I couldn't stop thinking about how excited I was to go to the graveyard in Tiernascragh and play it for my grandparents—to show them all the things they've given me.

When people ask me about what kind of journalist I want to be, I talk about the nuns. These are the kinds of stories I want to tell, and the ones that need to be told—of the vanishing, the brave, and the silent forces of history. The immersive nature of these deep dives is as awfully all-consuming as it is addicting, and I've come out of this reporting process a better interviewer, historically-minded thinker and more in awe of representatives of a religion than I'd ever thought I'd be.

Over the past two and a half years, people familiar with my project have often asked me, “Emma, how are your nuns?” My nuns are resilient, powerful women. They are bastions of justice and pillars of time. I know this is a story that will follow me forever.

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