

Ethel Cain: A Que(e)rying Saint

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Content Warnings: Allusions to incest and rape of a minor, spiritual abuse, drug abuse, domestic violence, forced sex work, murder, cannibalization, mentions of alcoholism

“Blessed Be the Daughters of Cain”: Ethel Cain and Hayden Anhedönia

You see Jesus up on the cross every morning, and then when you think about what’s going on behind the scenes – how many queer children are you crucifying to save your faith? How many of us are you putting up on that cross so you don’t have to go up there? Aside from the sick-ass imagery of hanging in a field in a white dress, that’s how it felt. You’re crucifying children to feel as close to God as you can get. If you wanna crucify me I’ll do it, I’ll get up on that fucking cross and hang there. I wanted it to be a raw image – no snakes, no blood. Here I am, this is what you wanted, this is what you get.

-Hayden Anhedönia, *Hero Magazine*¹

The debut album of Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, was released in May of 2022 consisting of thirteen tracks amounting to seventy-five minutes. *Preacher’s Daughter* follows the last several months of Ethel Cain’s life and explores themes of religious trauma, haunting, and violence. Ethel Cain is a twenty-year-old running away from the responsibilities and pressure of her hometown Shady Grove, Alabama.² Along with this pressure comes the haunting figure of her deceased father, the local preacher. Blurring the line between biological father and heavenly Father, Ethel attempts to escape his/their presence by leaving Alabama for a new life out west.³ On this journey, she first falls in love with Logan, a violent criminal who is killed in a shoot-out

¹ Hayden Anhedönia, “Ethel Cain’s Music is an Unforgiving Portrait of a Southern Baptist America,” interview by Conor Hudnut, *Hero Magazine*, April 25, 2021.

² Ethel Cain, “Thoughts and Prayers for Ethel Cain,” interview by Silken Weinberg, *Teeth Magazine*, February 17, 2022.

³ Jamie Mullennix, “Ethel Cain’s *Preacher’s Daughter* and the Southern Civil Religion,” 2024, unpublished paper.

with police officers. She then meets Isaiah, though questions of Ethel's reliability as narrator begin to appear in her recounting of their meeting, seen in the track "Thoroughfare." Hesitant to fall in love, she goes to California with him, hopeful for a new start. While on her journey with Isaiah, he drugs, abuses, and forces Ethel into sex work to instill control over her and her body.⁴ He eventually murders and cannibalizes her, though even death does not silence Ethel's voice. The last two tracks, "Sun Bleached Flies" and "Strangers," hears Ethel singing from the afterlife to both Isaiah and her mother, wishing to return to the comfort she felt with the church choir and her mother.

Ethel Cain is a character and stage name created by artist Hayden Anhedönia whose story is told in *Preacher's Daughter*. Born in 1998 to a devout Southern Baptist family in Florida, Anhedönia grew up largely involved in her church through the choir and found secular media by watching horror films with her grandfather.⁵ The religious and horror genre's influence on Anhedönia's childhood can be seen throughout her album's themes, instrumentals, and the lore of Ethel. On her twentieth birthday, Anhedönia came out on Facebook as a trans woman after years of questioning her sexuality, which had led to her ostracization from her family's church.⁶ Upon the release of *Preacher's Daughter*, Anhedönia explained "'You can only run so much from where you come from [...] Ethel was my scapegoat—she kept running and ends up chained to a bed in an attic. If I'm the good ending, she's the bad one.'"⁷ As Anhedönia reckoned with her own childhood, Ethel became a fictionalized outlet for her processing and healing from her trauma.

⁴ Ethel Cain. "Gibson Girl," track 8 on *Preacher's Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022.

⁵ Hayden Anhedönia, "Ethel Cain Fears No Darkness," interview by Ryan Dombal, *Pitchfork*, April 20, 2021.

⁶ Anhedönia, "Ethel Cain Fears No Darkness."

⁷ Hayden Anhedönia, "Ethel Cain's American Nightmare," interview by Wren Sanders. *Them*, May 12, 2022.

The study of hagiographies, or the sacred biographies of saints, includes examining the agency of its subjects, their influences and resulting impacts, and how external factors affect whose stories are documented and preserved. Hagiographies, particularly those of female saints, are rarely written without intermediation, introducing questions of agency and reliability. In the Catholic tradition, saints are religious figures who have been deemed righteous by the Church and canonized after their death. After canonization and dissemination of their story, believers can develop personal relationships and understandings of these saints as seen in Robert Orsi's account of his grandmother and Saint Gemma and Daisy Machado's writing on Santa Muerte as a saint of the borderlands.⁸ Building on Orsi's and Machado's analyses of the non-institutionalized relationships between saints and believers, I further the unsettling of sainthood by queering hagiography, proposing that Anhedönia, through Ethel, can be a saint outside the confines of religious institutionalization. Eve Sedgwick's definition of queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" guides this paper.⁹

With Sedgwick's definition in mind, queering hagiography calls attention to Anhedönia's depiction of Ethel doubting her faith before rejecting it altogether. However, what she ultimately objects to is the harm and control incurred at the hands of her father, the preacher. At first glance, Ethel's autobiographical narration of rejecting the patriarchal institution in favor of the comfort she found in her mother and the church choir speaks to a queering of hagiography. Her

⁸ Robert Orsi, "Two Aspects of One Life: Saint Gemma Galgani and my Grandmother in the Wound Between Devotion and History, the Natural and the Supernatural," in *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Daisy Machado, "Santa Muerte: A Transgressing Saint Transgresses Borders," in *Borderland Religion: Ambiguous Practices of Difference, Hope and Beyond*, ed. Daisy L. Machado, Bryan S. Turner, and Trygve Wyller (Routledge, 2018), 65-73.

⁹ Eve Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

rejection of the religious institution and the blind faith she grew up with presents a non-conformist approach to Christianity that expands what sainthood can be. With further analysis of Ethel's story as hagiography, the fandom in itself queers hagiography due to its devotion to and veneration of Anhedönia through Ethel outside of a religious institutionalization process, an example of "the open mesh of possibilities."¹⁰

In this paper, I identify *Preacher's Daughter* and Anhedönia's corresponding interviews as her hagiography. Due to both the artist Anhedönia and her fans blurring the divide between Anhedönia and her character Ethel Cain, it is through Ethel Cain that I argue Anhedönia achieves sainthood. I ask how Anhedönia and her album queers the genre of hagiography through the depiction of religious trauma, devotion, and rejection of a religious institution as well as the veneration of Anhedönia by her fans who refer to themselves as the Mother Cain fandom. This requires an understanding of the album's content alongside how fans connect to its themes. It also calls for looking at not just the album but how Anhedönia discusses the album and her agency through its creation.

I want to emphasize the purpose of this paper is not to make broad claims regarding all fans. I am attempting to show the potential of fandoms being spaces to discuss and process religious trauma, not claim that being a part of this fandom equates to healing from religious trauma or having religious trauma in the first place. To do this, first, I will analyze the artist Anhedönia's depiction of religious trauma and how the character Ethel processes and responds to this abuse. Second, I will examine how fans interpret, value, and venerate Anhedönia and her music with an emphasis on the theme of religious trauma. Lastly, I will explore the lasting

¹⁰ Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 8.

impact of *Preacher's Daughter* and how it contributes to the genre of hagiography as a queered hagiography.

With *Preacher's Daughter* increasing Anhedönia's fame, questions arose of where Ethel Cain the character ends and Hayden Anhedönia the artist and creator begins. While Anhedönia does not consider herself to actually be Ethel Cain, she has discussed feeling as if Ethel "possessed" her as a way to navigate and process her trauma.¹¹ Now with her first album out for more than two years, and a recent announcement for a non-Ethel-Cain-Cinematic-Universe album entitled *Perverts* to be released in January of 2025, Anhedönia appears to be creating more distance between herself and Ethel as she pursues other projects.¹² To highlight this boundary crossing, I will use "Ethel" for the character and "Anhedönia" for the artist when referring to the fan perception of Anhedönia and her project of *Preacher's Daughter*.

Outside of her musical projects, Anhedönia interacts with her fans through Tumblr in which fans utilize the ask feature to ask questions and show support for her music. Periodically Anhedönia responds to these asks, which requires her to post her response to her Tumblr dashboard and encourages further interactions with fans. Falling between the structured interviews and the casual online interactions of Tumblr sits Anhedönia's YouTube channel. Her uploads include music videos, official visualizer videos, recordings of her talking to the camera, and video snippets of her life. While I will not be focusing on her YouTube channel or her Tumblr account in this paper, I would be remiss to not recognize their existence and reach to fans. These online spaces contribute to blurring the division between celebrity and fan while also attempting to create a clearer distinction between the character of Ethel and the artist Anhedönia.

¹¹ Hayden Anhedönia, "The Book of Ethel Cain: How the Alternative Phenom Built Up Her Own Reality Only to Tear It Down," interview by Stephen Daw, *Billboard*, May 12, 2022.

¹² Eric Torres, "Ethel Cain Announces New Album *Perverts*," *Pitchfork*, October 14, 2024.

It is important to note that conducting research through TikTok comes with the limitations of the app's algorithm and recognition that the algorithm is influenced by my own general interactions on the app. For example, saving videos to a folder so I can access them later engages with the video, encouraging the app to show me similar content going forward. This means there are TikToks on this subject matter that I have not seen and are not as easily accessible.

While it is vital to not ignore that Anhedönia and Ethel are transgender women, it is also important to not reduce the album to their gender identity. *Preacher's Daughter's* emphasis on the body centers the gendered representation of Ethel, a common feature found in hagiography. In addition to reflecting the gendered aspect of Anhedönia and Ethel's stories, the recognition of their transness adds another layer to the artistic project. However, while it may be easy to focus on their trans identity, Anhedönia refuses to place her or Ethel's transness at the center of the album in an effort to challenge the idea that "trans people are a monolith."¹³ This refusal stems from Anhedönia's perspective that visibility holds the risk of placing her and Ethel's transness above all other elements of the story. She tells *Billboard*, "Ultimately, it's not about the identity itself, it's about the freedom to be whoever you are."¹⁴ While her and Ethel's trans identities are intrinsic to who they are, it's also not a label to which Anhedönia wants them to be reduced. In the same interview, she also highlights the importance of trans people being able to see themselves in media in which they had previously been excluded.¹⁵ Through her negotiation of visibility, Anhedönia also expands the possibilities for fan interpretations and gives more room

¹³ Hayden Anhedönia, *Billboard*, 2022.

¹⁴ Anhedönia, *Billboard*.

¹⁵ Anhedönia, *Billboard*.

for fans to queer the album for themselves.¹⁶ While I do not want to erase or dismiss either Anhedönia or Ethel's transness, I follow Anhedönia's lead in acknowledging their transness without making it a focal point.

Analyzing *Preacher's Daughter* as Anhedönia's hagiography, alongside the interview she did in-character as Ethel Cain, there is overlap between Anhedönia's reality and Ethel's fictional world. This reflects the hagiographical tendency to contain both historical and mythologized accounts of saints' lives.¹⁷ For example, the first lyrics Ethel sings are "These crosses all over my body / Remind me who I used to be."¹⁸ Similarly, Anhedönia has crosses tattooed on her forearms as a reminder of her religious background.¹⁹ These entangled stories of reality and fiction highlight that even if Ethel is a character within a dramatic and tragic southern gothic fiction, her story's real-life significance carries weight for her creator and those who consider themselves fans.

Weaving my own content analysis of the album and a discourse analysis of fans' responses, I center Henry Jenkins's participatory culture framework and Willa Blythe Baker's emphasis on community and conversation as tools of recovery and healing. Through the Mother Cain fandom's reception of *Preacher's Daughter* on TikTok and the album's narrative of processing religious trauma, Anhedönia invokes veneration from her fans as both the artist and through her portrayal as Ethel. With this veneration and the story of Ethel Cain, Anhedönia queers the hagiographic genre through her emphasis on religious trauma entangled with religious devotion.

¹⁶ Jamie Mullennix, "Queer Abstraction and Southern Nostalgia in Ethel Cain's *Preacher's Daughter*," 2024, unpublished paper.

¹⁷ Holly Gayley, "Thaumaturgy Omnibus," November 20, 2024, "Gender in Hagiography," University of Colorado Boulder.

¹⁸ "Family Tree (Intro)," track 1 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022.

¹⁹ Hayden Anhedönia, "Ethel Cain's Mastermind Hayden Silas Anhedönia on Life on the Road, Tattoos, and Finding Her People," interview by Aamina Inayat Khan. *Teen Vogue*, June 26, 2023.

“Am I No Good?”: Religious Trauma in *Preacher’s Daughter*

The southern gothic genre often explores themes of the taboo and a nostalgia for the past while incorporating the influence of Christianity.²⁰ Anhedönia cites the Southern Gothic genre and its writers as inspiration for her artistic work with their emphasis on the underbelly of the South. In Anhedönia’s own album, she explores the taboos of abuse and incest alongside the theme of religious trauma to create a twisted form of nostalgia in the songs.

Throughout *Preacher’s Daughter*, Ethel’s father, the local Baptist preacher, haunts the narrative. He died ten years before Ethel ran away, but his presence remains close to her. In character, Anhedönia was interviewed by her friend and tour photographer, Silken Weinberg about the ten-year anniversary worship service for Ethel’s father.

Out of his civvies? He was a good man. He wasn’t perfect but I don’t think anyone could have come closer. Towards the end, he really gave it all to God. Spent long nights at the church preparing his sermons. I missed him those nights, and still do, but... he had a calling, and he only ever got closer and closer.²¹

While this outward representation of the preacher celebrates him, the lyrics of “Hard Times” depict a different image. Reflecting on her childhood and relationship with her father, Ethel sings, “I was too young to notice / That some types of love could be bad / Praying I’d be like you / Doing all of the things that you do / And I still do / And that scares me.”²² As both her father and spiritual leader, the preacher betrays Ethel’s trust through his sexual and spiritual abuse, igniting her doubts in her faith.²³ The nostalgia she carries for an innocence to which she can never return sits opposite her disillusionment with the church and its empty promises of safety.

²⁰ Charles Crow and Susan Street, “Introduction” in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, ed. by Charles Crow and Susan Street, (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2016), 1-7.

²¹ Ethel Cain, *Teeth Magazine*, 2022.

²² “Hard Times,” track 6 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022.

²³ Willa Blythe Baker, “Breaking the Silence on Sexual Misconduct,” *Lion’s Roar*, October 14, 2024. <https://www.lionsroar.com/breaking-the-silence-on-sexual-misconduct/>.

Throughout the album, she wrestles with this nostalgia and disillusionment as she tries to escape out west but becomes trapped in similar cycles of abuse.

Willa Blythe Baker recognizes clergy sexual abuse to hold similarities to incest: both begin with trust placed in the person who becomes the abuser, and survivors often develop feelings of depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety, shame, and guilt.²⁴ Both forms of abuse are contingent on a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the survivor, and the listener hears these two forms of abuse compounded in *Preacher's Daughter*. The betrayal of trust found in clergy sexual misconduct contributes to spiritual mistreatment and a jeopardization of both parties' spiritual health.²⁵ The preacher's sexual abuse and resulting destruction of safe spaces for his daughter eats away at Ethel even after his death, which leads to her disconnection from her religious upbringing and community.

The preacher haunts Ethel to the point of the album being named after the relationship she has with him.²⁶ In the second track "American Teenager," Ethel is living at home and failing to juggle her responsibilities in the church, her religious doubts, and the struggles with alcohol. Like many survivors of clergy sexual abuse, Ethel developed a tense, internalized relationship with the church.²⁷ Ethel sings about her experience in church on Sunday morning, "Head full of whiskey / But I always deliver," coming to church inebriated but still able to fulfill her responsibilities.²⁸ As she continues to contribute to the church with her presence and leadership of the choir, she calls out to Jesus in the final verse: "Jesus, if you're listening, let me handle my liquor / And Jesus, if you're here / Why do I feel alone in this room with you?"²⁹ Without a faith

²⁴ Baker, "Breaking the Silence on Sexual Misconduct,"

²⁵ Baker, "Breaking the Silence on Sexual Misconduct."

²⁶ Ethel Cain, *Teeth Magazine*, 2022.

²⁷ Robert Orsi, "Events of Abundant Evil," in *History and Presence* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 220.

²⁸ "American Teenager," track 2 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022.

²⁹ Ethel Cain, *Teeth Magazine*, 2022; "American Teenager," track 2 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher's Daughter*, 2022.

independent of her father and her father no longer her religious conduit, Ethel's identity as the preacher's daughter becomes unstable.

Ethel's perception of her father "[giving] it all to God" and "only ever [getting] closer and closer" to Him provides two insights.³⁰ First, the preacher dedicated a significant amount of his time to the Church, poring over his sermons. The album and interview being from the perspective of Ethel allows the listener to learn the story through her eyes. The listener only knows of the preacher through Ethel, which limits what the listener knows of his relationship with Ethel and his death. Anhedonia made the choice to leave his death mysterious, not revealing if his death was premeditated or accidental. The lack of perspective from the preacher centers Ethel's voice, an act of agency that may not have previously been available to her while she was living under his thumb in Alabama.

The second insight this interview reveals is Ethel's struggle to distinguish her father as a fallible human from the infallible, omnipresent God. To Ethel, her father became an extension of God in both life and death. His authority as preacher instilled in Ethel feelings of fear and love, feelings she then extended to God. For Ethel, the spiritual and sexual abuse was "an event of abundant evil" with which she continues to struggle to acknowledge the pain inflicted by her father and her love for him.³¹ The preacher holds power over Ethel due to his spiritual authority, his well-respected status in the community, and his role as Ethel's father. A part of Ethel's struggle to cope with the abuse was her repeated desire to find love in romantic partners, all of whom eventually betrayed her trust.

The final track "Strangers" records Ethel's final address to Isaiah, her lover who drugged, trafficked, murdered, and cannibalized her. The chorus hears Ethel's self-doubts, singing "I tried

³⁰ Ethel Cain, *Teeth Magazine*, 2022.

³¹ Orsi, "Events of Abundant Evil," 216.

to be good / Am I no good? / Am I no good? / Am I no good?”³² The question of goodness had previously been introduced in “Hard Times” with Ethel addressing her late father, “I thought good guys get to be happy / I’m not happy / I am poison in the water and unhappy / Little girl who needs her daddy real bad (real bad).”³³ Much like her desire to be good in “Hard Times,” Ethel ties her worth to the men she loves. As Ethel’s father and minister, the late preacher shaped where Ethel seeks love and how she responds to the inflicted abuse. She continues to try and be good for these men, but she believes herself to fall short. However, listeners can hear Ethel begin to heal in the final verse of “Strangers.” No longer addressing Isaiah, she turns to her mother, telling her “Mama, just know that I love you (I do) / And I’ll see you when you get here.”³⁴ In the last moments of her story, Ethel turns back to her mother, seeking her comfort and love. No longer seeking a masculine God or her blurred images of Him in her father and other partners, Ethel calls for her mother in hopes of their reunion in the afterlife.

Ethel’s religious trauma is gendered in that she struggles to be autonomous of her father and through him God. She does not believe she can save herself from her doubts and wavering identity as exemplified in the fifth track “Family Tree.” She begs to be saved, though to whom she begs is unclear. She sings, “Give myself up to him in offering / Let him make a woman out of me,” walking the line of religious imagery and sexual innuendo.³⁵ Ethel’s willingness to give herself to this unidentified man carries religious and sexual connotations as she is either willing to give herself up to God or give herself up to a lover, entering adulthood through this sacrifice. Later in the song, she tells the unidentified person “So take me down to the river and bathe me clean / Put me on the back of your white horse to ride / All the way to the chapel, let you wash

³² “Strangers,” track 13 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022.

³³ “Hard Times,” track 6 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022.

³⁴ “Strangers,” track 13 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*.

³⁵ “Family Tree,” track 5 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022.

all over me.”³⁶ Invoking the imagery of river baptisms, common practice in evangelical Christian congregations and rural areas, Ethel seeks out a reinforced connection to Christ whether that be through the sacrament of baptism washing away her sins or losing herself in her lover and his perceived saviorism. Again, the boundary between flawed human man and infallible God becomes blurred, leaving Ethel desperate for reassurance of her safety. Ethel, confronting the religious trauma she experienced at the hands of her father, queers the hagiographic genre, placing her/Anhedönia as a queered saint.

In the darkest track “Ptolemaea,” Ethel’s voice fades out when a deep, unnamed voice speaks to her. He begins with “Blessed be the Daughters of Cain / Bound to suffering eternal / through the sins of their fathers / committed long before their conception.”³⁷ Ethel’s suffering remains inescapable due to her father perpetuating much of her trauma in childhood, and this unnamed voice declaring her suffering to be something greater than herself: an inevitability. The voice eliminates Ethel’s autonomy and voice in its speech, rendering her silent for the remainder of the song. The next two songs are instrumental tracks, keeping Ethel quiet until she enters the afterlife.

Anhedönia’s choice to name Ethel Cain stems from Cain and Abel being her favorite Bible story.³⁸ In the story, Cain commits the first murder by killing his brother Abel and for this God cursed Cain to wander the earth.³⁹ Through the sin of Cain and the sin of her biological father, Ethel’s suffering was determined before her birth and will affect those who come after. Her death at the hands of Isaiah with the unnamed voice calling her to the afterlife elevates her

³⁶ “Family Tree.”

³⁷ “Ptolemaea,” track 12 on Ethel Cain, *Preacher’s Daughter*, Daughters of Cain, 2022.

³⁸ Hayden Anhedönia, “Ethel Cain is Ready to be Your Favorite Character,” interview by Grant Rindner. *Nylon Magazine*, April 19, 2021.

³⁹ Genesis 4 (New International Version).

gendered suffering to martyrdom. Both “Family Tree” and “Ptolemaea” are the lowest moments of Ethel’s life—the moments in which she was closest to death.⁴⁰ She fears for herself as she must confront the harm that has been done to her by the men she trusted the most and the absence of a miracle to save her, queering traditional Christian hagiographies of accepting one’s fate in the face of death.

My analysis of the album’s fictional story is not meant to minimize the sexual abuse survivors face in cases of clergy sexual misconduct, incest, or any other form of sexual abuse. The album acts as a method of critiquing those with religious power who have taken advantage of the trust placed in them due to their leadership. The use of fiction to critique larger social issues is not new or unique to *Preacher’s Daughter*.⁴¹ The popularity of the album indicates its ability to resonate with listeners. Fan response to the album ranges from physical responses such as nausea and tears to emotional reactions like grief, obsession, and healing.

“God Loves You But Not Enough to Save You”: Mother Cain and Fandom

Preacher’s Daughter explores the boundaries between character and artist, trust and betrayal, and multiple forms of devotion. The album critiques the unchecked religious authority and influence of its preacher with the U.S. South and the lasting effects of the region’s atrocities as the album’s backdrop. Throughout the story, Ethel wrestles with the love and devotion she has for her father as she acknowledges the pain and fear he caused her as well. Due to her conflation of him with God, she feels guilt for her religious doubts. When the guilt gets to be too much, she believes her only response can be running away and leaning into everything off-limits: alcohol,

⁴⁰ Nadine Smith, “Ethel Cain’s Majestic Melodrama is the Sound of the Future,” *Highsnobiety*, 2022.

⁴¹ Holly Gayley and Somtso Bhum, “Parody and Pathos: Sexual Transgression by ‘Fake’ Lamas in Tibetan Short Stories,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* 63, 2022.

drugs, and sex. However, her rebellion does not relieve her of the cycle of abuse she experienced from her father. Instead, she continues to grapple with the devotion she feels toward God, her father, and her lovers. The trust she placed in these fallible men was an extension of the trust she placed in a god she feared did not exist. Boundary blurring is a major facet of how Anhedonia's *Preacher's Daughter* shapes the Mother Cain fandom.

As seen in Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, the division between fan and religious devotee is not always distinct. Since the publication of his book, fan culture in the United States and internationally has skyrocketed. "Stans," a combination of "stalker" and "fans" originating in rapper Eminem's song "Stan," describes fans who are dedicated to a particular celebrity to the point of obsession.⁴² However, obsession is not a requirement for fans, and stan culture is not wholly negative. Stans network and build community around their chosen celebrity or piece of media, but this form of belonging can be conditional on newcomers assimilating to dominant fan discourses.⁴³ This is not to say one must be a stan to be a part of the Mother Cain fandom and see Anhedonia as a saint. As a celebrity, Anhedonia carries influence through her social media presence and music. Fan response to her content and songs circulates theories, questions, and reactions, developing the fandom and its community. Within the fandom, fans often feel connected to her music based on their own positionality and personal history with gender, sexuality, and Christianity in the U.S. As Jenkins reminds us, fan participation allows for fans to "become active participants in the

⁴² Kimberly Vazquez, "A Psychological Look at Stan Culture," *Intersect Magazine*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.intersectmagazine.com/post/a-psychological-look-at-stan-culture/>.

⁴³ Rhicki Bermudez et. al, "'The Filipino 'Stan' Phenomenon and Henry Jenkins' Participatory Culture: The Case of Generations X and Z,'" 2020. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342547230_The_Filipino_Stan_Phenomenon_and_Henry_Jenkins_Participatory_Culture_The_Case_of_Generations_X_and_Z/.

construction and circulation of textual meanings.”⁴⁴ This can be seen in the adoption of the fandom’s name “Mother Cain.” Anhedönia had initially referred to Ethel as “Mother” before the release of *Preacher’s Daughter*. At this time, Anhedönia planned to depict Ethel as the family’s matriarch. During the 2020s, “Mother” became popular on social media as a title given to show respect and admiration for women, often those who are celebrities. However, the title originated in ballroom culture with drag mothers being more experienced drag queens who took less experienced drag queens under their wings.⁴⁵ It has been used throughout queer culture, and has since been used by stans to describe favorite celebrities, such as Ethel/Anhedönia.

Fan participation reaches new heights with the accessibility of connection and community through social media. The Mother Cain fandom lives across multiple platforms; Tumblr, YouTube, TikTok, Reddit, X, and Instagram contain pockets of community centering Anhedönia and her work. She can be found on Instagram, Tumblr, and YouTube under the handle @mothercain. Anhedönia manages her own Tumblr and YouTube accounts instead of putting it in the hands of her management, which grants her more control over what she posts. On these sites, Tumblr in particular, Anhedönia interacts with her fans on her own terms, responding to asks, reblogging fan art, and curating her blog with her own interests and those related to her albums. On her blog, Anhedönia stated she does not introduce herself as Ethel on an individual level, but this does not eliminate her fans referring to her as Ethel.

Fans venerate Ethel/Anhedönia through their references to her lyrics, embodied reactions, and dedication to Ethel/Anhedönia’s projects. Obsessing, feeling sick, crying, and counting

⁴⁴ Henry Jenkins, “‘Get a Life!’: Fans, Poachers, Nomads,” in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. (Routledge, 1992), 24.

⁴⁵ For more of an introduction to drag culture, see Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*. For more on the dissemination of “mother” in popular culture, see Nick Levine, “Mother: A Queer Term Centuries in the Making,” *Gay Times*, February 22, 2023. <https://www.gaytimes.com/originals/mother-a-queer-term-centuries-in-the-making/>.

down to her new album illustrates how fans respond, and their online public posts contribute to the fandom's participatory culture. Further, fans share their analyses online and critique those of others, which can become contentious.⁴⁶ These efforts to have the "correct" or "most canonically accurate" interpretation of *Preacher's Daughter* illustrate a hierarchy of devotion within the fandom, but this does not feature as the primary characteristic of the fandom. This may change with the growth of the fandom and Anhedönia's release of new projects, but with *Preacher's Daughter* as Anhedönia's only released full-length album, the fandom largely revolves around the lore of the album, the album's aesthetics, and Anhedönia's ability to elicit emotional responses from her fans.

The lyric "God loves you, but not enough to save you" from the song "Sun Bleached Flies" stands out as one of the most memorable lines among fans. Soon after the album's release, it became a trend on TikTok for fans to post their reactions to the album and its theme of religious trauma in connection to this lyric. For example, one fan records herself with the caption "i don't think i have any religious trauma, i grew up with a pretty normal relationship with the church" while "Sun Bleached Flies" plays. The video then cuts to her sitting in a darker area, back against the wall, knees drawn to her chest, arms crossed on top of her knees, and head resting against her arms as the lyrics "God loves you. but not enough to save you" appears on the screen in line with Ethel's voice.⁴⁷ The TikTok shows a fan curling in on herself, highlighting the connection fans have with *Preacher's Daughter* and Ethel's struggles with her religion.

Another TikTok following this trend shows a man saying "'Preacher's Daughter' by Ethel Cain does a decent job explaining religious trauma and growing up queer in the church but

⁴⁶ For example: @qu1nn_blvnt, "'How am I supposed to say Ethel's new album name' open your lips and speak," October 31, 2024.

⁴⁷ @katieburris2, "God loves you, but not enough to save you," January 18, 2024.

it could say it better, you know?” before cutting to him sitting on a bench, staring into the distance. The lyric “God Loves You But Not Enough to Save You” appears in the sky above him. Emphasizing the impact of this lyric, his caption “She really popped off with this lyric I should get it tattooed shouldn’t I?” speaks to the significance this lyric holds for fans.⁴⁸ One fan did get the lyric tattooed on the back of their neck with the caption on their video being “she is so important to me,” “she” being Ethel Cain.⁴⁹ While it is not clear if Ethel Cain in this case is referring to the character in *Preacher’s Daughter* or the stage name for Anhedönia, the boundary between the two is blurred to a degree that the message of devotion does not diminish.

On TikTok fans post not only their interpretations, responses, and tattoos of *Preacher’s Daughter* but clips from Anhedönia’s live performances. These recordings may take place anywhere in the concert venue, but the clearest videos are filmed at the barricade when Anhedönia comes to stand directly in front of her fans. Most often during her song “Crush” off her EP *Inbred*, Anhedönia repeatedly holds hands with fans and stares into their eyes as they sing the lyrics together.⁵⁰ The artist encourages an intimate connection between her and her fans during these performances, lessening the divide between herself and her fanbase. Fans experience an individualized personal experience with Anhedönia in which they are able to express their devotion while also spurring further devotion after their interaction with her.

⁴⁸ @iamtristanscott, “God loves you, but not enough to save you,” June 23, 2022.

⁴⁹ @chemicalcleandmeme, “God loves you, but not enough to save you,” November 13, 2024.

⁵⁰ Astro Nina (@astro-nina), “reunited with my bby <3, TikTok, October 6, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTYH89bY1/>; @pink_nectarine, “best birthday ever,” August 25, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTj2Xr7QR/>; @hildimausi, “my entire body is aching but i’m in heaven now #ethelcain in live in amsterdam, June 6, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTj2XKFn5/>; Jacob Agius (@jacobagius), “very intimate moment with mother #mothercain #ethelcain #ethelcainmelbourne thank u ethel cain,” TikTok, June 10, 2023 <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTYHN2rUp/>; Greek Theatre (@greektheatre), “such a sweet moment of #ethelcain singing to a fan tonight at the #greektheatre in #losangeles thank you for coming,” TikTok, June 23, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTYH8L5r4/>.

Anhedönia contributes to a queered reinterpretation of religious devotion without wholly separating herself from religious themes and imagery. Returning to the epitaph that begins this paper, Anhedönia hung herself from a cross to illustrate her reclaiming of both her autonomy and the religious imagery of her religion in the face of anti-trans and anti-queer biblically-based rhetoric. She is not the first artist to reimagine Christ on the cross, as seen in Caravaggio's homoerotic paintings which remain popular as a queering of Christ. While Caravaggio emphasizes the physicality of Christ, Anhedönia obscures her own. Taking the place of a barely clothed Jesus Christ, Anhedönia hangs on the cross in a long white dress, her long brown hair covering a portion of her face. The only skin visible are her feet, hands, and a glimpse of her face. While transgender folks, particularly trans women are often reduced to their bodies, Anhedönia rejects this fetishization in favor of being visible in the clothes she associates with Ethel Cain.⁵¹ Through these fashion choices, she asserts control over her image and how she makes herself visible.

⁵¹ Susan Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*. (Routledge, 2013).



Figure 1⁵²

Anhedonia's intentional choice to put herself on the cross contributes to a queering of Christ. By hanging upon the cross, she embodies the transgressiveness of Christ, portraying, as Isherwood writes, "an immersion in the triumph of the divine incarnation."⁵³ As fans cite *Preacher's Daughter* as art in which they see themselves and their trauma, Anhedonia also turned to Ethel as a way to process her own trauma.⁵⁴ She tells *Billboard*, "When I write [abuse and trauma] into a song—and this is one of the reasons that I created this alter ego instead of releasing it myself—is that it's like I give it to her. When it's happening to her, it's no longer happening to me, it's now her problem."⁵⁵ Similarly, fans on TikTok call *Preacher's Daughter* a

⁵² Briscoe Park (@briscoepark), "Save Us," March 19, 2021, Instagram, March 19, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMnZktaB0BJ/?igsh=NmdicDNxamNvNHBq>.

⁵³ Lisa Isherwood, "Queering Christ: Outrageous and Theological Rebellions," *Literature and Theology* 15, no. 3 (2001): 260. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23925131>.

⁵⁴ Iris Mallon (@iris.mallon), TikTok, October 13, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTYH8Lv18/>; Listening to Catfish (@listeningtocatfish), TikTok, September 27, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTYH8DwjF/>; Skum Towel (@skumtowel), TikTok, September 14, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTYH8x4me/>; They Them Thatbitch (@they.them.thatbitch), TikTok, May 7, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTYH8Vkyd/>.

⁵⁵ Hayden Anhedonia, *Billboard*, 2022.

relatable representation of religious trauma. One fan writes, “[The artist] has created a world for me where I can leave my current state without dissociating from my pain, I have healed through her music.”⁵⁶ Another who grew up Southern Baptist describes “Sun Bleached Flies” as a “gut punch” that “sounds like a hymn but tackles the complex feelings of losing your faith and coming to the realization that you were raised to believe what isnt [sic] what you were told it would be leaving you feeling just utterly alone...”⁵⁷ This language of having physical responses to the album while also feeling uniquely seen illustrates the impact of Anhedönia and her music on the lives of her fans. Finding solace in her music is not a dismissal of Christianity or its institutions but an expansion of how those who feel betrayed or hurt by Christian religious institutions can find healing in alternative spaces.

The devotion found in the Mother Cain fandom and its similarities to religious devotion is not simply due to Anhedönia’s choice to include religious imagery in her art but a recognition by fans of themselves in her art. Her discussion and portrayal of religious themes creates a space for those harmed by the church to come together in community and discuss the album as a tool for processing and working through religious trauma. Fans may or may not leave behind their religious beliefs, practices, and communities; and whether they do or not is not a determining factor in resonating with *Preacher’s Daughter*. Instead, the Mother Cain fandom acts as an alternative, non-institutionalized space where fans can find healing.

⁵⁶ @listeningtocatfish, September 27, 2024.

⁵⁷ @skumtowel, September 14, 2023.

“He’ll Never Escape What He’s Made Up Of”: The Lasting Impact of Ethel Cain

Hayden Anhedönia’s influence through the character of Ethel Cain contributes to depictions of religious trauma in popular culture, and her fandom demonstrates how religious trauma can be processed by its survivors outside of strictly religious spaces. Both artist and fans reclaim their autonomy and voice in ways that may otherwise be limited or muted. The blurriness of Ethel and Anhedönia’s identities creates a space in which Anhedönia is venerated by devoted fans through the story of Ethel. In Anhedönia’s portrayal of Ethel in interviews and on tours, fans see a character they have listened to come to life. The themes and lyrics resonate with fans, particularly queer and trans fans and those in the U.S. South.

Through the creation of fan-made edits, recaptured clips of live streams, Tumblr asks, YouTube comments, and fan reaction videos/posts across Tumblr, YouTube, and Tiktok, Ethel elevates Anhedönia to a revered, queered saint by the Mother Cain fandom. The involvement of the fandom in the creation of Anhedönia’s sainthood speaks to a fluid, dynamic meaning-making of *Preacher’s Daughter* as hagiography. As previously mentioned, the lyric “God loves you, but not enough to save you” encapsulates for many fans the album’s theme of religious trauma and its grip on those who may be struggling with their own religious trauma or doubts. Ethel’s death is central to the plot of *Preacher’s Daughter*, and her reflections on her religious past contribute to fans’ interpretations of Ethel. Her doubts, trauma, and yearning for her mother in death complicates her devotion to God but provides an insight into religious trauma that shifts this question of devotion away from the relationship between Ethel and God to the relationship between Anhedönia and her fans.

Historical hagiographies, especially those of women, require critical examination of the saints’ portrayals, the author(s), and the goals of the hagiography. Even with *Preacher’s*

Daughter being written by Anhedönia, the question of agency remains crucial regarding authorship, character portrayal, and goals. While *Preacher's Daughter* is self-narrated, that does not render the narrator reliable. In the album, Ethel says that she chose to go with Isaiah in Texas, but according to an interview Anhedönia did in character as Ethel, Ethel was kidnapped by a stranger in Texas. The discrepancy between these two accounts speaks to Ethel's unreliability as narrator. This is not to call into question any of the abuse Ethel faced but to call attention to how in telling Ethel's story, Anhedönia tweaked details to reflect Ethel's agency—or lack thereof—in telling her story.

Throughout interviews as herself, Anhedönia conveyed the importance of the album in processing her own trauma. Through Ethel, Anhedönia was able to address her experiences with betrayal and feeling unsafe in religious spaces. Fans in turn identified with the lyrics and themes of *Preacher's Daughter*, resonating with the album, its fanbase, and its creator. The blurring between Ethel and Anhedönia is an example of queering hagiography; when Anhedönia sought a creative path to explore religious trauma and its complexity, it created an alternative space for fans outside of religious institutions. In the larger subfield of trans and queer studies in religion, queering hagiography contributes to complicating the established division between transness and queerness as secular and religion as traditional and conformist.⁵⁸ In this case, queering hagiography comments on how fandom can be alternative avenues of community with similar religious themes of devotion and veneration.

The story of Ethel Cain as told in Anhedönia's *Preacher's Daughter* and fleshed out by interviews expands the genre of hagiography to include figures who struggle with their faith and

⁵⁸ Ahmad Greene-Hayes, "Street Evangelists and Transgender Saints: Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and the Religions of the Afro-Americas," *QTR: A Journal of Trans and Queer Studies in Religion* 1, no. 1 (May 2024): 32-52, <https://doi.org/10.1215/29944724-11208911>.

religious identity outside of traditional institutions like the Church. This inclusion creates a space for those who may not find comfort or healing in the place that had previously harmed or continues to harm them. Anhedönia's *Preacher's Daughter* and the resulting Mother Cain fandom queers the genre of hagiography through the artist's refusal of explicitly claiming transgender visibility, her depiction of religious imagery, and fans blurring the separation of religious devotion and celebrity devotion.

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