

Disavowing race and Ireland's asylum system

Ronit Lentin

In August 2018 [a trans-gender woman called Sylvia was found dead](#) in a Direct Provision centre in Galway. The Department of Justice and Equality confirmed the death of the woman believed to have been living in the men's ward of the centre despite identifying as a woman. Sylvia's death is the sixty third death in the Direct Provision system, established in 1999 to house asylum seekers, whose lives, and deaths, remain hidden from public view and disavowed by white Catholic Ireland. Ireland has been incarcerating asylum seekers in Direct Provision centres where asylum seekers receive bed, board and a paltry weekly "residual income maintenance payment to cover personal requisites" of 21.60 euro ([raised in 2017 from €9.60 per child, and €19.10 per adult](#)).

Against this background, I propose that hiding the existence of asylum seekers in Ireland is the mirror image of the long history of the disavowal by Irish state, society and media of people forcibly incarcerated in church institutions and in psychiatric asylums, about whose lives Irish people knew but preferred not to know, just as they now know but prefer to disavow the existence of asylum seekers in Direct Provision centres.

This article argues that disavowing the existence of asylum seekers means denying the centrality of race and state racism in Ireland. Though racialized by the state, asylum seekers in Ireland have been staging active resistance in various forms since the mid-1990s, and thus cannot be regarded as victims but must rather be seen as agents of active resistance. I conclude by arguing that breaking the silence about asylum seekers' enforced incarceration, reminiscent of breaking the silence about the past experiences of women and children incarcerated in church institutions, forces Ireland to look at itself in the tarnished mirror of its racialized composition. Race, I argue, must therefore be theorized as the central tool of disavowing what white Irish society wishes to deny and hide from view.

Abuse, asylum: Denial and disavowal

Denial, according to the sociologist Stanley Cohen (2001), is a paradox. We must assume that when using the term "denial" to describe a person's statement "I didn't know", she knows about what it is that she claims not to know. Cohen calls bystanders with liberal values "inner emigrants," who survive the atrocities committed by their states by looking away, retreating into private life and cutting themselves off from the unpalatable reality by what I describe as "managing not to know." In the Irish case, this stance of "inner emigrants" is reminiscent of the pain of actual emigration.

The public shock about the revelations since the 1990s about the incarceration of unmarried mothers in "mother and baby home" and Magdalene laundries and the abuse of thousands of children in industrial schools, coupled with the admission by many Irish people that they did

know that the women laundering their clothes were the nuns' slaves, and that their children went to school with residents of the industrial schools, illustrates the disavowal of what Irish people were aware of but chose to repress.

Ireland has a breath taking history of incarceration. According to O'Sullivan and O'Donnell (2012), the Irish state locked up one in every 100 of its citizens in psychiatric hospitals, Magdalene laundries, and "mother and baby homes," where Irish women pregnant out of wedlock were sent by their families and shunned by state and society. This continued the legacy of the 1838 Irish Poor Law that established 130 workhouses to cater for the destitute poor. It also applied to children – one child in every 100 was enslaved in industrial schools, where many were physically, sexually and emotionally abused by members of Catholic orders.

Irish Times columnist [Fintan O'Toole](#) links this vast incarceration to emigration, which "banished" many "misfits" who might otherwise have been locked up. The fact that the Irish institutions of incarceration were located in towns and cities throughout the country meant that claiming "not to know" about them was disingenuous. The harm done to the incarcerated, O'Toole writes, was augmented by the damage done to Irish society as it taught "a whole society very deep habits of collusion, of evasion and, perhaps most insidiously of all, of adaptation."

The incarceration system, which Irish society knew but chose not to know about was only acknowledged publicly in the mid-1990s after media revelations of the plight of children in industrial schools and women in Magdalene Laundries. However, despite these revelations that forced Irish society to acknowledge past abuse, present day Irish society "manages not know" about asylum seekers living in dire conditions in Direct Provision centres. This disavowal, I argue, is not accidental, but rather engineered by the state that chose to hide from view psychiatric patients and unmarried pregnant women and their unfortunate children punished for their mothers' alleged "sins." In the case of asylum seekers, the story is complicated by state racism, as the state racializes and dehumanizes asylum seekers who it removes from sight, enabling their disavowal by today's Irish society.

Like its history of incarceration, Ireland's refugee reception history is also shocking. Having refused to admit more than 60 Jewish refugees during the Nazi era between 1933 and 1946 despite its neutrality, Ireland accepted small groups of Programme Refugees in 1956, 1972, 1979, 1985 and 1992. Asylum seekers began arriving in Ireland in the early 1990s: the number of applications increased from 39 in 1992 to a peak of 11,634 in 2002, decreasing ever since (Lentin and McVeigh 2006: 45). In 2017 there were 2,972 applications for international protection. Ireland has the second-lowest rate (13 per cent) of granting asylum in the European Union and compares poorly with the EU average of 44 per cent.

In 2016 the Dáil passed the International Protection Act based on a Single Application Procedure. The Act raises serious concerns in relation to the ease with which it facilitates deportations: in 2016 Ireland enforced [428 deportation orders](#), a rise from 251 deportations in 2015. In addition, [more than 28,000 non-EU citizens were refused entry](#) to present

applications for international protection between 2008 and 2016, further increasing their invisibility. The International Protection Act also facilitates the erosion of refugee families' reunification rights and impacts applicants already in the asylum process in relation to the availability of legal advice and sufficient time and resources to shorten the waiting time.

In May 2017 the [Supreme Court unanimously agreed](#) that the absolute ban on asylum seekers working was unconstitutional, and in October 2017 the Minister for Justice announced the intention to give asylum seekers the right to work. However, the right to work was conditioned by a series of restrictions, some of which were lifted as a result of a Right to Work campaign led by the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (MASI). Despite the campaign and the increasing visibility of the plight of asylum seekers thanks to the efforts by asylum seekers and their supporters, applicants for international protection continue to lead invisible lives in centres located in remote locations, deliberately hidden by the state from public view.

The Direct Provision system is part of Ireland's coercive enforcement system, as argued by historian [Fiona Fitzsimons](#):

Just like the old workhouses, the Direct Provision system has meal-breaks at specific times of the day and a "curfew" system at night. But unlike the workhouses, the people detained in the Direct Provision system do not have the option of leaving. They haven't broken any laws to end up there but they are in the Direct Provision system indefinitely as they wait for their case to be concluded.

Irish people adopt an "out of sight, out of mind" attitude to asylum seekers in Direct Provision that can be theorized as Fanon's (1967) "zone of nonbeing." While Direct Provision centres are not detention centres or prisons, asylum seekers' freedom is limited, and Direct Provision centres are "non-places," where undefined incarceration is the only existence.



From www.asylumarchive.com

I am moved by asylum seekers' testimonies and by projects such as former asylum seeker Vukasin Nedeljkovic's photographic [Asylum Archive](#) project, which documents the desolate lives of asylum seekers in remote sites throughout Ireland, hidden from view, to theorize the Direct Provision existence as "slow death," which, as Lauren Berlant (2007: 759) argues, "does not describe specific individuals, but rather populations marked out for wearing out. In other words, slow death is not about an orientation towards the death drive but rather about the maintenance of the living, "a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life."

Isolated and racialized by the Irish racial state, asylum seekers, like the inmates of Ireland's workhouses, psychiatric hospitals, industrial schools, Magdalene laundries and "mother and baby homes," are perched at the edge of Irish life, and disavowed as Irish society manages not to know of their existence.

In 2002, in the first edited collection on racism and antiracism in Ireland (Lentin and McVeigh 2002), I argued that during the "Celtic Tiger" boom years Ireland's vehement opposition to in-migration entailed a disavowal of the pain of emigration. The immigrant other represented the return of the repressed painful Irish experience of e/migration, known to every Irish family, but disavowed during the boom years. Denying that Irish people can be racist – having themselves been colonized and racialized by the British – and disavowing both the pain of emigration and the experiences of immigrants, Irish society was looking away, looking and not looking at the forbidden other, who represented what Irish people did not want to see, namely themselves, undressed.

Moving from 2002 to 2018 – with 19 years of Direct Provision, extremely low refugee acceptance rates, and a desperate housing and homelessness crisis – disavowal is again apparent. The familiar of poverty and emigration is returning to haunt Ireland's collective consciousness, while making Irish people disavow, yet again, the plight of people seeking refuge in their midst. In the process the familiar becomes frightening, enabling the denial not of what "we" do not know, but of what "we" know only too well.

The protests by asylum seekers in Direct Provision since 2014 and the concerted campaign for the right to work by MASI, extensively reported by social and mainstream media, as well as various projects such as Nedeljkovic's Asylum Archive, make visible the plight of asylum seekers in Direct Provision, cut off from Irish society as many Irish people continue to choose to ignore and disavow the Direct Provision system.

Resistance, race, collective trauma

Coming up to Pope Francis's Irish visit in August 2018, [many Irish people demanded](#) that the Pontiff acknowledge the abuse of countless Irish women and children incarcerated in church institutions and abused by priests and members of religious orders. Alternative "Nope to the Pope" and "Truth, Justice, Love" rallies staged at the same time as the papal mass, drawing thousands, including victims of church abuse and incarceration, indicated a society coming to term with its collective trauma by speaking about the past and resisting its negative impact.

I was particularly struck by theatre director Grace Dyas narrating her encounter with the late Christine Buckley, who was incarcerated in the Sisters of Mercy's Goldenbridge industrial school (and who featured in Louis Lentin's 1996 documentary "Dear Daughter" for RTE, the first exposure of the widespread abuse which started the process of coming to terms).

A day after the Pope's departure, another Dublin gathering made space for narratives of trauma and resistance when the Abbey Theatre brought together actors, musicians, dancers and residents of Ireland's Direct Provision centres to share experiences and defy Ireland's draconian immigration regime. The gathering, "Jimmy's Hall Today" was an off shoot of the Abbey show "[Jimmy's Hall](#)," the story of the returned emigrant and community leader Jimmy Gralton who built a dance hall in his County Leitrim town. As the hall gained popularity, its free-spirited reputation drew the attention of the Catholic Church and local politicians who forced Jimmy to flee and the hall to close. Gralton was the only Irish citizen to be deported from Independent Ireland until the deportations in the 1990s of citizen children born in Ireland to migrant parents. In 2004, however, the citizenship entitlement to all people born in the island of Ireland was reversed by a Constitutional amendment that replaced the 83-year-old entitlement with granting citizenship only to children born in Ireland to citizen parents (Lentin and McVeigh 2006: 42-43).

The Abbey gathering was particularly poignant through the fact that one of the dancers, Pakistani nurse [Vekash Khokhar](#), was to be deported immediately after the performance. Khokhar spoke to the audience, thanking Ireland for the time he spent there, saying he preferred to leave the country voluntarily ahead of his deportation to avoid facing potential detention as a deportee on his arrival in Pakistan. Ironically, [Khokhar received a letter](#) from the Irish National Immigration Service informing him that his asylum status was being reconsidered by the Department of Justice. So perhaps protests and political agitation do work after all.

So where does race come in?

Though denial and disavowal are no longer acceptable in a society continuing to look elsewhere, and thanks to the tireless work of victims of abuse and of asylum seekers and their supporters, one key issue remains disavowed.



Christine Buckley (in Louis Lentin's Dear Daughter documentary, TheJournal.ie)

Christine Buckley, a mixed race woman, the daughter of a Nigerian medical student and a white Irish woman, testified to being regularly called “black bastard” by the white Irish nuns. Buckley was one of 70 known mixed-race children who were taken into care in industrial schools because they were mixed race, whose shamed white Irish mothers felt the need to hide them from public view. They believe that there was a different unspoken “policy” for them, and [that they suffered an “extra layer of abuse” because of their racial identity](#). Mixed race people who spent their childhoods in industrial schools have come together in the [Mixed Race Irish](#) campaign and support group. They say racism was endemic, systemic and systematic in the care system and in Irish society, and that their experiences were particular to them.

When one of them, Rosemary Adasser, the daughter of an African doctor and a white Irish woman, was admitted in 1958 as an 18-months old baby to a mother-and-baby home, her admission notes described her as “illegitimate and coloured”. Her mother had to leave the city to have her, such was the shame of being unmarried and pregnant by a black man. Fifteen years later, when she was pregnant and sent to another mother-and-baby home, they described her as “rather mature for her age; accepts her colour well.” Speaking of her experience, Adasser says: “My file is peppered with references to my colour. The racism was relentless and brutalizing. My formative years were devastated by it.” Like Buckley being called “black bastard” by the Mercy nuns, Adasser was called “blackie, nigger, golliwog, rubber lips, darkie” in the Kilkenny St Joseph industrial school.

Buckley's and Adasser's experiences of racial abuse epitomize the as yet unacknowledged experiences of many people racialized in Ireland's systems of incarceration. However, just as race does not feature prominently in the survivors' narratives of trauma, it is not central to the narration of the experiences of people in Direct Provision, probably because race is still taken to denote biological features rather than political processes. After all, though people in Direct Provision are not all black or brown, they are all racialized and dehumanized by state racism. As race scholar Alexander Weheliye (2014: 26) writes: “humans create race for the benefit of

some and the detriment of other humans.” Race, remember, was created to preserve white supremacy.

My key argument then is that in addition to disavowing the enforced incarceration of Irish people in psychiatric establishments and clerical institutions in the past and the coerced incarceration of asylum seekers in present day Ireland, race represents a further level of disavowal. According to the Australian scholar Patrick Wolfe, race is a “process, not an ontology.” Wolfe describes race as “colonialism speaking in idioms whose diversity reflects the variety of unequal relationships,” and argues that “races are traces of history” (Wolfe 2016: 5). This is relevant in the case of Ireland that continued the history of British colonial incarceration of destitute poor Irish people during the Famine with incarcerating Irish people in church and state institutions, and asylum seekers in present day Ireland.

Yet the centrality of race is being denied and disguised through arguments of “common sense” immigration policies that include incarceration and deportation. However, as race scholar [Alana Lentin](#) (2017) argues, denying racism constitutes racist violence. This can be witnessed in definitions of racism that side-line or deny race as either a historical phenomenon no longer relevant, or as experienced by racialized people and therefore of secondary importance. That the racially dominant define what racism is has become central to its discussion in a variety of contexts. However, she argues,

the emphatic nature with which ‘not racism’ is declared today can be seen as the culmination of a protracted period of debate and denial. The current period, during which we are witnessing a deepening and expansion of systemic, state and popular racism against migrants and asylum seekers, the undocumented, Indigenous people, Muslims and Black people is, I suggest, accompanied by an ever more vigorous denial that these phenomena are racist.

Concurring with her that “the assertion of ‘not racism’ that accompanies many structurally white discussions of and pronouncements on matters of race is itself a key form of racist violence,” I argue that race must be theorized as the central tool of disavowing what Ireland’s white society wishes to deny and hide from view. In the case of the incarceration of asylum seekers in Direct Provision, the very disavowal of race denotes nothing less than racist violence.

Bio:

Ronit Lentin is a political sociologist, writer, activist and former Associate Professor of Sociology in Trinity College Dublin. Her books include *After Optimism: Ireland, Racism and Globalisation* (2006, with Robbie McVeigh), *Race and State* (2006/2008, with Alana Lentin), *Thinking Palestine* (2008), *Co-Memory and Melancholia: Israelis Memorializing the Palestinian Nakba* (2010/2014), *Migrant Activism and Integration from Below* (2012, with Elena Moreo), and *Traces of Racial Exception: Racializing Israeli Settler Colonialism* (2018).

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