Disavowing asylum and the return of Ireland’s repressed

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Asylum seekers in Ireland have been incarcerated in Direct Provision centres since 1999. This article proposes that their existence is disavowed and hidden from public view, continuing the history of the disavowal by church, state and society in Ireland of people incarcerated in church institutions and psychiatric asylums. Disavowing and repressing phenomena such as taboo sexuality, mental health, migration, asylum and racialization has the habit of returning to haunt, in the manner of Freud’s return of the repressed. The article explores the plight of asylum seekers as the most recent link in the chain in Ireland’s practice of disavowing its sexual and other deviants and unwanted populations. I conclude by arguing that despite their racialization and incarceration, asylum seekers in Ireland are agents of active resistance.

Keywords: asylum seekers, Ireland, disavowal, return of the repressed, Direct Provision, incarceration.

In August 2018 a trans-gender woman called Sylvia was found dead in a Direct Provision centre for asylum seekers in the West of Ireland city of Galway. The Irish 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 shocked asylum seekers and their supporters in Ireland as it exposed not merely the abysmal lives imposed on asylum seekers in state care, but also the gendered aspect of hiding what Catholic Ireland has for years regarded as aberrations as has been the case in disavowing the fate of thousands of women pregnant out of wedlock incarcerated in church-run “Mother and Baby Homes” and “Magdalene Laundries.” Speaking of the gendered element of Sylvia’s death, Irish Senator Máire Devine, said to Gay Community News:

“LGBT+ people [in Direct Provision] are terrified of coming out, they’re terrified of being who they are … if they do announce that they are LGBT+, the reaction is fairly vicious, there’s the bullying, the persecution, the sending to Coventry and probably a lot more than that. There’s fear of physical attacks and that has raised its ugly head at times” (Finnegan, 2018)

The death of Sylvia is the sixty third death in the Direct Provision system, established in 1999 to house asylum seekers in Ireland, whose lives, and deaths, remain hidden from public view and thus disavowed by white Catholic Ireland.

Ireland has been incarcerating asylum seekers in what is euphemistically known as “dispersal centres” or “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) (Bardon, 2017).

Against this background, this article proposes that hiding the existence of asylum seekers in Ireland is the mirror image of the history of the disavowal by Irish state, society and media of people forcibly incarcerated in church institutions and in psychiatric asylums. After discussing the practice of denying what Irish people both knew but preferred not to know – namely the plight of people coercively incarcerated in church and state institutions – I move to argue that repressing and disavowing phenomena such as taboo sexuality, mental health, migration, asylum seeking, and racialization has the habit of returning to haunt, in the manner of Freud’s theorization of the return of the repressed. To illustrate my argument I explore the treatment of asylum seekers as the most recent link in the chain in Ireland’s practice of disavowing its sexual and other deviants and unwanted populations, as illustrated by the forcible incarceration of Irish women in church institutions for giving birth out of wedlock and of countless Irish children in religious institutions simply because they were poor or born out of wedlock. The stories of these women and these children, made public for the first time only in...
the late 1990s, were highlighted in 2018 during the visit by Pope Francis in Ireland, after years of denial and disavowal.

Though racialized by the state and largely ignored by majority society, asylum seekers in Ireland have been staging active resistance in various forms since the mid-1990s (Lentin, 2012), and thus cannot be regarded as victims but rather as agents of resistance. This moves me to conclude by arguing that asylum seekers breaking the silence about their enforced incarceration, reminiscent of breaking the silence about the past experiences of women and children in church institutions, returns to haunt Irish society and forces it 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 Ireland’s white society wishes to deny and hide from view.

ABUSE, ASYLUM: DENIAL AND DISAVOWAL

Denial, according to the sociologist Stanley Cohen (2001, pp.5-6), 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. The most profound forms of cultural repression become part of consensual reality as societies arrive at unwritten agreements about what can and cannot be publicly remembered and acknowledged. Theorizing what he terms “bystander states”, Cohen (2001, p.147) calls bystanders with liberal values “inner emigrants,” who survive the atrocities committed by their states by retreating into private life and cutting themselves off from the unpalatable reality by what I describe as “managing not to know” (Lentin, 2016). In the Irish case, not only does such “innerism” shield society from disturbing realities, it also means that the position of “inner emigrants” mirrors the pain of actual emigration. As I argued elsewhere (Lentin, 2002), Irish society managed to disavow the pain of emigration, known to most Irish families since the 19th century Great Famine, until the advent of immigrants and asylum seekers in the 1990s forced it to acknowledge this pain, illustrating both Cohen’s denial paradox, and Freud’s “return of the repressed.”

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 hundreds of children in Irish industrial schools coupled with the admission by many Irish people that they had used the laundries and knew 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 were repressing.

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 to by their families and shunned by state and society – continuing the legacy of the 1838 Irish Poor Law that established 130 workhouses to cater for the destitute poor (Fitzsimons, 2014). At any given time between 1926 and 1951, there were about 31,000 people in these institutions. This also applied to children – one child in every hundred was enslaved in an industrial school, which, unlike reformatories that were intended for children found guilty of criminal offences, were for orphaned and abandoned children. After Irish independence, industrial schools, mostly run by Catholic orders, took in children of poor or “sinner” mothers.

Irish Times columnist Fintan O’Toole (2012) links this vast incarceration to emigration, which “banished” many “misfits” who might otherwise have been locked up. Indeed, 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. According to O’Toole, the system served as a warning to the disobedient, particularly as family members were forcing pregnant daughters into Magdalene Laundries or “mother and baby homes” and sending the hapless children of “bad” mothers to industrial schools where many were physically, sexually and emotionally abused, as detailed by a series of
inquiry committees in the 2000s. The harm done to the incarcerated, he 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 mechanism of denial – of what we actually know – can be illuminated by Freud’s (1919/2018, p.85) work on the unfamiliar or uncanny:

“that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar [... which] can become uncanny and frightening”

Freud argues that we often repress that which we are afraid of, which is familiar and known to us yet becomes estranged in the process of repression. And the repressed, he reminds us, always returns to haunt.

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. The revelations began with television programmes including Louis Lentin’s “Dear Daughter” and Mary Raftery’s “states of Fear,” that led to the Murphy, Ryan and MacAleese reports, the Redress Board and to official apologies by Taoiseach Bertie Ahern (for the industrial schools) and Taoiseach Enda Kenny (for the Magdalene laundries).

I propose that though the revelations that forced Irish society to acknowledge the abuse constitute the return of Ireland’s repressed, they do not prevent present day Irish society “managing 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. The state chose to dehumanize and hide from view the plight of psychiatric patients incarcerated forcibly by families and the medical establishment, and of unmarried pregnant women spurned by Catholic Ireland (while the men who impregnated them enjoyed impunity), and of the hapless children of poor mothers who church and state punished for their mothers’ alleged sins. In the case of asylum seekers the story is complicated by state racism as the state chooses to racialize and dehumanize asylum seekers who it removes from sight and constructs as a (financial) “burden,” enabling their disavowal by today’s Irish society.

As Luke Lamont (2017) says in his paper on the theatrical representations of the industrial schools and the Magdalene laundries (“The Blue Boy” and “Laundry”), present day Irish society can choose between remembering or forgetting the past evils that it had chosen – encouraged by church and state – to know and not know about at the time:

“When the details of Ireland’s history of abuse and enslavement were made publicly available by the Ryan and McAleese reports, much of the rhetoric in defence of the institutions which perpetrated and perpetuated these crimes described that these were “different times”, it was a “different Ireland”. Productions like “The Blue Boy” and “Laundry” show us that the past is present; we can decide as a society what to prioritise, and who to remember”

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 (Lentin, 1997), Ireland accepted small groups of Programme Refugees in 1956, 1972, 1979, 1985 and 1992 (Ward, 1998). 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 fact, the Department of Justice refuses to provide 2017 data under Freedom of Information legislation citing that data would be available on Eurostat later this year, leading to hiding the realities of asylum from the Irish public (Fagan, 2018).

In 2016 the Irish parliament 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 the Irish state enforced 428 deportation orders, a rise from 251 deportations in 2015 (The Journal, 2017). In addition, more than 28,000 non-
EU citizens were refused entry to Ireland to present applications for international protection (asylum) between 2008 and 2016, including over 2,000 people from countries now recognized by the Government as conflict zones or areas of humanitarian concern (Fagan, 2018). This further increases the invisibility of asylum applicants, not only those already in Ireland but also people never allowed to present their applications. The International Protection Act also facilitates the erosion of refugee families’ reunification rights and impacts the applicants already in the asylum process in relation to the availability of appropriate legal advice and sufficient time and resources to shorten the waiting time.

Although the Direct Provision system was originally intended for no more than a six months stay, 19.5 per cent of the 5,610 applicants currently residing in 34 Direct Provision centres have been in the system for over three years. The average length of stay was 38 months while 450 people had been living in Direct Provision for more than seven years, and, not being allowed to work or to study in third level institutions, this has led to people becoming de-skilled, bored, depressed, destitute, and institutionalized.

In May 2017 the Supreme Court unanimously agreed that the absolute ban on asylum seekers working was unconstitutional (Carolan, 2017), and in October 2017 the Minister for Justice announced the intention to give asylum seekers the right to work. However, the right to work has been 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), resulting in more than 500 asylum seekers being granted work permits by August 2018 despite limitations such as the inability to open bank accounts or get drivers’ licences (Bardon, 2018). 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.

Between 2000 and 2017 Ireland received 75,726 asylum applications and since 2000 provided accommodation in Direct Provision centres for 59,165 applicants. The Direct Provision system is part of Ireland’s coercive enforcement system, as argued by Fiona Fitzsimons (2014):

“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 centres that can be theorized as Fanon’s (1967) “zone of nonbeing,” described by Lewis Gordon as “a zone of neither appearance nor disappearance” (Gordon, 2007). While Direct Provision centres are not detention centres or prisons – residents may leave the centre but they have to come back to sign the daily register in order to get the 21.60 euro weekly allowance, their free medical card, daily meals and a roof over their heads. Asylum seekers are conditioned by these regulations and their freedom is limited. Direct Provision centres are “non-places,” where undefined incarceration is the only existence.

It has been proposed by asylum seekers that their incarceration and isolation aim to prevent them from contaminating Irish society. The immunization is therefore performed upon their arrival in the Direct Provision centre, the vaccine of corrective and disciplinary measures.

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 corners throughout Ireland, hidden from view, to theorize the Direct Provision existence as “slow death.” Death, Jasbir Puar (2017, pp.11-12) writes, can in some situations become “durational,” occurring not within the time scale of the crisis or the catastrophic event, but rather, as Lauren Berlant (2007, p.759) argues:

in a “zone of temporality… of ongoingness, getting by and living on, where the structural inequalities are dispersed, the pacing of their experience intermittent, often not in phenomena not prone to
capture by a consciousness organized by archives of memorable impact.” Slow death 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.”

Furthermore, Direct Provision centres:

“signal a sort of surplus of ‘bare life’ that can no longer be contained within the political order of nation-states yet cannot be entirely disposed of, and is thus trapped in between spaces and statuses” (Walters 2002, p.286)

Thus isolated, 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 might 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 growing housing and homelessness crisis – disavowal is again apparent. The familiar of poverty and emigration is returning to haunt Ireland’s collective consciousness, making Irish people disavow, yet again, the plight of people seeking refuge in their midst. In the process Freud’s familiar becomes uncanny and 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 Nedljkovic’s Asylum Archive, and Catherine Young’s dance troupe, all 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 AND THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

Pope Francis’s visit to Ireland in August 2018 drew far fewer Catholics to the papal mass delivered in Dublin’s Phoenix Park than the previous papal visit in 1979. Coming up to the visit, many Irish people demanded that the Pontiff acknowledge the abuse perpetrated against countless Irish women and children incarcerated in church institutions and abused by priests and members of religious orders (The Journal, 2018). An 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 not only that what was long repressed is returning to haunt a changing Ireland, but also a society coming to term with its collective memory of 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”, the first exposure of the widespread abuse which started the process of coming to terms). Buckley, who became the emblem of the struggle by survivors for redress and justice, told Dyas that when survivors were coming to the centre she established to provide them with the education they had been deprived of in clerical institutions, and wishing to tell her their stories, she would say to them, “before you open your mouths, I want you to know that I believe you.” That unconditional belief, and the survivors’ narratives shared in the “Truth, Justice and Love” rally signal resistance and agency, denoting both the return of the repressed traumatic memories and the potentialities of
recovery.

A day after the Pope’s departure, another Dublin gathering made space for narratives of trauma and resistance when the Abbey, Ireland’s National Theatre, brought together actors, musicians, dancers and residents in Ireland’s Direct Provision centres to share experiences and defy Ireland’s draconian immigration regime. The gathering, “Jimmy’s Hall Today” was an offshoot of the Abbey show “Jimmy’s Hall,” which tells the story of the returned emigrant and community leader Jimmy Gralton who built a dance hall in his County Leitrim town where he encouraged the local community to learn, to argue and to dream, but above all to dance and have fun. As the hall grew in popularity its free-spirited reputation brought it to the attention of the Catholic Church and local politicians who forced Jimmy to flee and the hall to close. Jimmy Gralton became the only Irish citizen ever to be deported from Independent Ireland until the deportations in the 1990s of children born in Ireland to migrant parents, deemed citizens of Ireland as per the Irish Constitution which granted jus soli citizenship to everyone born in the island of Ireland and allowed migrant parents to care for their citizen children. In 2004, however, the jus soli citizenship entitlement 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, pp.42-43).

The gathering in the Abbey Theatre was particularly poignant and emotional, quite apart from the vibrancy of the performances. Deportations raised their ugly head, not only through Jimmy Gralton’s story, but also through the fact that one of the dancers, Pakistani nurse Vekash Khokhar, was to be deported immediately after the performance was over. 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 (Pollack, 2018a).

Ironically, Vekash Khokhar – called Vicky by his friends and supporters – received a letter from the Irish National Immigration Service informing him that his asylum status was being reconsidered by the Department of Justice (Pollack, 2018b). His supporters say they will do all they can to get him back to Ireland. So perhaps protests and political agitation do work after all.

The spirit of resistance and determination was palpable both in the Abbey Theatre and in the Truth, Justice, Love rally as survivors of past abuse and incarceration, and people incarcerated in Ireland’s present day Direct Provision centres raised their voices in telling their stories and demanding redress and freedom from trauma and enforced coercion.

Though denial and disavowal are no longer acceptable in a society continuing to look elsewhere, and thanks to the tireless work of both victims of abuse and of asylum seekers and their supporters, one key issue remains disavowed. Christine Buckley, a mixed race woman, the daughter of a Nigerian medical student and a married Irish woman, testified in the “Dear Daughter” documentary to being regularly called a “black bastard” by the white Irish nuns. Buckley was one of 70 known mixed-race people who believe they were taken into care in industrial schools because they were mixed race, whose shamed white Irish mothers felt the need to hide from public view, that there was a different unspoken “policy” for them and that they suffered an “extra layer of abuse” because of their racial identity (Holland, 2015). Mixed race people who spent their childhoods in industrial schools have come together in the past few years 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, was admitted in 1958 as an 18-months old baby to a mother-and-baby home in Dublin, her admission notes described her as “illegitimate and coloured”. Fifteen years later, when she was pregnant and sent to another mother-and-baby home in Co Meath, 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 Christine Buckley, Rosemary Adasser
was also the daughter of a white Irish woman and an African doctor. Her mother had to leave the city to have her, such was the shame of being unmarried and pregnant – particularly by a black man. Like Christine Buckley being called a “black bastard” by the Mercy nuns, Adasser was called “blackie, nigger, golliwog, rubber lips, darkie” in the St Joseph industrial school in Kilkenny. Buckley’s and Adasser’s experiences of racial abuse epitomize the as yet unacknowledged experiences of many people victimized and racialized in Ireland’s systems of incarceration. However, just as race does not feature prominently in survivors’ narratives of trauma, race is not central to the narration of the experiences of people in Direct Provision, probably because race is still taken to denote biological rather than political processes. After all, though people living in Direct Provision cannot all be said to be black or brown, they are all racialized and dehumanized by state racism. As race scholar Alexander Weheliye (2014, p.26) writes:

“humans create race for the benefit of some and the detriment of other humans”

My final argument then is that in addition to disavowing the enforced incarceration of many thousands 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. Race scholar Alana Lentin argues that denying racism is a form of violence and says that it can be witnessed in definitions of racism that either 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 been central to its discussion in a variety of contexts. However, she argues:

“the emphatic nature with which ‘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 both the experiences of mixed race children and women incarcerated and abused in religious institutions in Ireland and the incarceration of asylum seekers in Direct Provision, the very disavowal of race denotes nothing less than racist violence.

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