CHAPTER 5

Academics Becoming Activists: Reflections on Some Ethical Issues of the Justice for Magdalenes Campaign

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TWENTIETH-CENTURY MAGDALENES: IRISH WOMEN IMPRISONED IN A FREE STATE

Magdalene institutions in Ireland date from the (mid-)eighteenth century, and until the late nineteenth century their history parallels that of asylums for poor and destitute women found all over Europe, run by religious orders or lay-managed philanthropic concerns seeking to provide needy women with refuge.¹ Magdalene asylums often provided training and references of good character for these women so that after their rehabilitation they could go into service and earn a living. The Magdalenes were run according to a Protestant or Catholic ethos: most Christian denominations took the life of Mary Magdalene as their inspiration. Christian traditions hold that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute who did penance for her sinful ways by washing the feet of Jesus and drying his feet with her hair. Jesus forgave Mary Magdalene her sins and she became one of his

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most prominent followers. The rationale for these institutions was that even the prostitute, that most scandalous and sinful of women, could be forgiven for her sins if she was sufficiently remorseful and did penance. The Christian concept of penance involves actions of humility and labour—the more humble and more onerous the labour, the greater the Divine grace and forgiveness that might be bestowed. Many Christian traditions have focused on controlling the reproductive and sexual bodies of women on the assumption that female sexuality is replete with potential to cause ‘occasions of sin’. The nominally celibate, exclusively male Roman Catholic clergy have long monitored and admonished monitoring Catholic women’s reproduction and sexuality, promoting a cultural view that women (like their biblical foremother Eve) tempt men into sexual sin.

Ireland’s War of Independence from British rule ended in 1921 and in the following year 26 of the island’s 32 counties established the Irish Free State, or Saorstát. By 1922 the long tradition of Magdalene institutions in Europe was already adapting to new social and legislative realities, with many of them adapting to focus on providing services for ‘unmarried mothers’ and their ‘illegitimate children’. The association of Magdalene asylums as temporary or retirement places for prostitutes or women who had ‘fallen’ into ‘sins of the flesh’ persisted largely in cultural memory. However, in the newly independent Ireland, the 10 remaining Magdalene institutions—all Catholic in ethos—were about to get a renewed lease of life and purpose in the young country. Irish patriots were eager to establish their control in symbolic and material terms. Maternity and social reproduction became a key ground on which to assert an Irish national discourse of moral probity and purity, particularly in relation to the former coloniser. The argument ran that while the British Empire might be vastly wealthier and more politically powerful, the fledging Irish state would maintain a sense of supremacy on the higher moral ground.

This argument ran along a distinctly gendered axis: the men who took control of the Free State territory in the partitioned island of Ireland immediately began to establish their new found powers of self-governance by demonstrating control over the firepower of militarised men and the sexuality and reproductive powers of women. The Irish establishment was keen to show their former overlords in the British establishment that they could keep law and order and they were also eager to gain international recognition. I use the word ‘establishment’ to describe the symbiotic dyad of Catholic Church and state bodies that combined to share and establish their power in the new country. This establishment still holds significant sway in twenty-first-century Ireland when we consider how much of the
Irish national education and health services continue the practice of being state-funded/Church-run.

One of the most striking aspects of the Irish establishment has been how consistently it has focused on crushing support for militant Republican Irish nationalism, even as Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution laid claim to the territory of the entire island of Ireland. The Irish establishment has also been consistent in denying Irish women reproductive justice. The tenets of reproductive justice uphold the values of human rights and declare that those people who can get pregnant are the ones who ought to decide if and when they will have a baby and the conditions under which they will give birth. Reproductive justice also entails that those who are pregnant should decide if they will not have a baby and have options for preventing or ending a pregnancy. Its advocates hold that those who give birth should be allowed to parent the children they have with the necessary social supports in safe environments and healthy communities, and without fear of violence from individuals or the government. For most of the past 96 years, the Irish establishment has denied access to contraception; and some hospitals inflicted symphysiotomies rather than providing caesarean sections. This Irish establishment—in particular the judiciary and legal profession—was busy taking away the children of poor women and putting them into abusive industrial and reformatory schools. And, because it declared unmarried mothers ‘a problem’, it ran Mother and Baby Homes for the confinement of these women, who often found themselves giving birth without pain relief. The children born in these homes were declared ‘illegitimate’ and died in disproportionately large numbers while infants; if they survived, they were boarded out, sent to industrial schools or, after 1953, placed for adoption. Access to sterilisation was forbidden and fertility treatment was and still is curtailed. When we consider these factors (together with others: e.g., divorce was introduced a mere 20 years ago; there is a dire shortfall in services to address domestic abuse; and sex education is still not taught in a systematic way in Irish schools), then we begin to apprehend the contours of reproductive oppression in twentieth-century Ireland. The effects and legacy of this oppression manifest in all those directly affected, those who are related to them, and in multi-generational reverberations of trauma and loss. These effects are visible still in the Irish Constitution, which defines a pregnant girl or woman as a ‘mother’, where her foetus is defined as ‘the unborn’ and is guaranteed the same ‘right to life’. If the pregnant person is medically declared suicidal (and it is extremely difficult to obtain this confirmation), then she may be
allowed to terminate her pregnancy. Other than this extremely rare event—no matter what the causes or circumstances, no matter even the viability of the pregnancy—the person who is pregnant has a constitutional obligation to remain pregnant and endure the labour of birthing. In this context, the Magdalene institutions are best understood not as an aberration but as a logical function within the ideology of the Irish establishment where law and policy have purposefully and systematically controlled and exploited women’s sexuality, labour and bodies.  

This ideology and practice was beginning to form even in the midst of the Civil War of 1922 when W.T. Cosgrave, first President of the Executive Council, found money and large premises to give to Frank Duff (1889–1980), who established the Legion of Mary in 1921 and made the eradication of prostitution in Dublin a particular focus of his mission. Duff was a prominent civil servant who—like most of the Irish civil servants of that era—had initially been employed in the public service by the British. Prior to Irish independence all Irish cities and most large towns included a visible population of garrisoned British soldiers and each Irish urban district had an active trade in prostitution that serviced the military. Irish nationalist discourse depicted the British military as carriers of syphilis. This hackneyed denunciation is illustrated in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, when the fulminating Irish nationalist ‘Citizen’ in the Cyclops chapter denounces British colonial rule and civilisation as nothing more than a ‘syphilization’ (Joyce 1986, p. 266). Irish nationalist feminists specifically sought to counter the misery that venereal infection, spread by the soldiers, caused women and their children in Dublin. Irish Citizen Army Medical Officer Dr Kathleen Lynn and her feminist colleagues founded St Ultan’s Hospital in 1919 in an effort to combat the suffering of poor children, many of whom were suffering from syphilis contracted from their mothers during birth. The Dublin death rates for poor women and children at this time were the worst in Europe. However, the enlightened approach of Lynn and other Republican feminists was immediately sidelined by the Irish Free State, which undermined the work of these radical women in the decades immediately following independence (Ó hÓgartaigh 2006). During the immediate post-independence era, the prostitute was a reminder to the new Ireland of the evils associated with British military rule. Dublin’s prostitutes could be seen visibly operating in a number of areas in the city such as the Phoenix Park, on the docks, around St Stephens Green and most famously in the Monto district, which was Europe’s largest ‘red-light’ district (an area of less than one square mile just to the east of the
city’s main thoroughfare of Sackville Street, which is now known as O’Connell Street). From the first weeks of the establishment of the Free State, the women who sold sex in this area fell under the attention of the Legion of Mary, which was one of the first of many state-funded/Catholic-run organisations in twentieth-century Ireland. Duff managed to gain powerful supporters for his social purity campaign, most notably the outspoken Jesuit Fr. R.S. Devane and Major-General W.R.E. Murphy (Liam Ó Murchadha), commissioner in the Dublin Metropolitan Police. On the night of 12 March 1925, the social purity crusade made an organised assault on the brothels of the Monto. Over 120 arrests were made; every house was blessed by a priest and the area ceased to be a red-light district. Local history asserts that many of the arrested women were incarcerated in the large Magdalene of Gloucester St/Sean McDermott St, whose presence marked the northern boundary of the Monto district (Fagan 2000).

With a heavy accent on ensuring social purity and sexual respectability, the new Free State maintained a system of incarcerating vulnerable women and children for most of the twentieth century in Ireland; it did so by using the inherited British colonial system of massive Victorian institutions run by Catholic religious orders which had provided basic levels of relief to the Irish poor. Most of these institutions had been established after wide-scale famine in the 1840s had devastated the population, and as starvation and poverty continued to be endemic in the decades thereafter. The Irish middle class (and those aspiring to gain social respectability for their families) joined religious life in great numbers in the later decades of the nineteenth century, a pattern that continued until the later decades of the twentieth century. The colonial Victorian apparatus of mass institutionalisation of the socially and economically vulnerable (particularly women and children) was maintained by a system of capitation payments to the religious orders from the Irish state exchequer for most of the twentieth century. The Irish establishment of Church and state also built Mother and Baby Homes and some purpose-built industrial schools. Ireland’s prison population was a relatively negligible percentage of the population at this time, yet about 1 in every 100 Irish citizens was incarcerated in an institution operated collaboratively by the Church/state establishment; these included psychiatric hospitals, industrial schools, Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene institutions.10

The Irish Magdalene institutions remained in existence for most of the twentieth century; the last one, on Sean McDermott St, abutting the old Monto district, closed in 1996. They were run by religious sisters from
four different orders. The Order of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge (OLC) ran laundries in High Park, Drumcondra and Seán McDermott Street in Dublin; and The Sisters of the Good Shepherd ran Magdalenes in Cork City (Sunday’s Well), Waterford, Limerick and New Ross, Co. Wexford. The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy ran laundries in Galway and Dún Laoghaire, and the Sisters of Charity ran Magdalenes in Cork (Peacock Lane) and Dublin (Donnybrook). After 1922, these institutions no longer offered temporary asylum and opportunities for women to train for a career in service. They did not have a rationale of benign penance but—increasingly—were deliberately punitive. There was a general assumption in Irish culture that the girls and women who were held there had to atone for sins (generally ‘sins of the flesh’) that they were adjudged to have committed or have been at risk of committing. The Magdalene Oral History project that I led reveals that girls and women incarcerated in the Magdalenes were the victims of incest, sexual assault and rape. Some were raised as children in industrial schools. They were generally young and motherless, and they might have given birth outside wedlock. A few were intellectually challenged; some had committed minor crimes or were destitute.

The regime was harsh: the nuns held the Magdalene girls and women under lock and key; the police hunted the Magdalenes, if they escaped, and they returned them to the institutions, if they caught them. The sisters cut girls’ and women’s hair short when they were brought into the institutions, and gave them a religious name and sometimes also a number. This was the name and number by which they would be known inside the institution, as the nuns sought to erase their former identity and insist on treating the Magdalenes as ‘penitents’. The Magdalenes wore a uniform; they rose at about six in the morning and went to Mass, and then worked without pay, usually 6 full days a week, at laundry or needlework. They slept in dormitories and they were often cold. The food was meagre and poor; sanitary and hygiene facilities were degrading. If they broke the rules, the girls and women were punished by being put into solitary confinement without food. Any friendship was forbidden, and the rule of silence and prayer between the inmates was strictly applied in most institutions. Magdalene survivors report ritual humiliation by many of the religious sisters. The most cited refrain was ‘Nobody wants you; that’s why you’re here’. Letters were censored or undelivered; visitors were strongly discouraged and the rare visits that did take place were always held under the supervision of a nun. The older
population was ‘institutionalised’: utterly lacking in expression of agency and will, they are often described as ‘zombies’ by younger survivors who report how frightening they seemed. Co-inmates could disappear—literally—without notice or explanation; perhaps the nuns transferred them to a different laundry, committed them to a mental hospital or placed them in another menial working situation within another Catholic religious institution. The girls and women left behind in the Magdalene were rarely told what had happened to the missing inmates. There was horizontal violence to varying degrees across the institutions. Women were encouraged to become ‘auxiliaries’ to the nuns, by accepting life-long incarceration, not petitioning to get out or otherwise not challenging the Magdalene system. As a reward for internalising their subjection, they received the title ‘auxiliary’. ‘Auxiliaries’ regularly reported to the nuns on any infractions of the rules they may have witnessed or suspected; they were allowed to give certain orders to the other inmates and sometimes participate in enforcing punishments. They also had the promise of a distinguished burial on the grounds of the institutions.

Some women did try and escape, although it was difficult given that they were held under lock and key and behind high walls. Those who did escape were hunted by the Gardaí (the Irish police force), and, if they were caught, they were returned to the Magdalene where they underwent punishments that had the effect of deterring further attempts by them or the other Magdalenes. Some girls and women left the Magdalene institutions, taken out by very determined family members. Oral histories indicate that by the late 1970s and early 1980s some women managed to leave the Magdalene institutions by finding the strength to consistently agitate for release. This often happened without warning. There was no opportunity to say goodbye to other inmates; rather they got out of their uniform, into an outfit of clothes provided by the nuns, and found themselves placed in menial jobs in other religious-run institutions. These assertions, based on testimonies in the Oral History project, compensate for the fact that the religious orders will not release Magdalene records for the twentieth century, even in redacted form. Yet research conducted by Claire McGettrick indicates that, for at least two institutions (High Park and Donnybrook in Dublin), approximately half of the girls and women who were incarcerated between 1954 and 1964 died behind the convent walls (McGettrick and Justice for Magdalenes Research 2015).
THE MOTIVATION FOR THE JUSTICE FOR MAGDALENES CAMPAIGN

The Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) campaign was founded in 2003 by three adoption rights activists, two of whom are the daughters of women incarcerated in Magdalene Laundries for a combined total of approximately 60 years (O’Rourke 2015, p. 160). These Magdalene women had lost their children to adoption, and reunion with their adult children was nearly impossible to achieve, as Ireland continues to uphold a system of closed and secret adoption for all adoptees. The Catholic religious orders which managed this system are notoriously culpable in preventing mothers and their children lost to adoption from achieving reunification: allegations of deliberate falsification of records, including false registration of births, are routine. The activists who founded JFM began initially by reactivating the Magdalene Memorial Committee (MMC), which started in 1993 and lobbied to have a dedicated plaque on a bench in St Stephens Green to commemorate the women of the Magdalene Laundries. After a 3-year campaign, the MMC was eventually successful and in 1996 Ireland’s first female President, Mary Robinson, unveiled the plaque, which reads ‘To the women who worked in the Magdalene Laundry institutions and to the children born to some members of those communities—reflect here upon their lives’. The irony was that, when the MMC began its campaign in 1993, it was focused on commemorating Magdalene women as if the Magdalene Laundries were a thing of the distant past, yet most had only recently closed down and there were still hundreds of women institutionalised behind convent walls. Indeed, one Magdalene Laundry was still in operation in Dublin’s city centre in Sean McDermott Street. The Magdalene in Sean McDermott Street did not actually close its commercial operations until 6 months after President Robinson had unveiled the memorial plaque in St Stephen’s Green.

The MMC was formed in response to the scandal of the exhumation of a communal Magdalene grave in High Park, Dublin, in 1993. The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity (OLC) decided to sell some of their land at High Park, Drumcondra, to a property developer. The OLC applied to exhume 133 bodies from a large Magdalene grave on their campus and they got the developer to agree to split the costs of clearing the site of bodies. Contrary to Catholic practice, the nuns cremated the bodies in Ireland’s sole crematorium and interred the ashes at dawn in a plot they owned at Glasnevin Cemetery. 10 years later, journalist Mary Raftery broke the story that, as the
human remains were being disinterred from the mass grave, an additional unaccounted 22 sets of remains were discovered which meant that the nuns were required to apply for supplementary exhumation licences for women they seemed unable to adequately account for. Moreover, the exhumation licences obtained from the Department of Environment were issued based on information from the OLC that was cursory at best. Many of the names listed were religious names given to the women on entry into the Magdalene Laundry, and there were 46 women listed who did not have complete names. Over one third of the burials, that is 80 women’s deaths, had never been certified (Raftery 2003, 2011). Funerals and care of burial plots are given significant attention in Irish culture, and Irish people like to think that honouring the dead is something that we do particularly well.¹⁴ The disregard with which the four religious orders have treated the remains of Magdalene women speaks volumes to the Irish public, who understand that the careless way the nuns have treated the burial of Magdalene women highlights the treatment the women endured while alive.

**Anatomy of a Campaign**

I joined the JFM campaign in 2009 at the invitation of Professor James Smith of Boston College, who had written the groundbreaking book *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* (2007). In advance of the publication of his book, Smith had been increasingly public in discussing his research and in collaborating with activists. He joined JFM after having the experience of meeting a survivor of the Magdalenes, who had read his book and had contacted him. Smith also recruited Maeve O’Rourke to JFM when she contacted him about his Magdalene research in the course of her studies for a master’s degree in human rights law at Harvard. Of the initial three adoption rights activists who had founded JFM, two remained actively engaged for the course of the campaign, and these were Mari Steed and Claire McGettrick. JFM was a not-for-profit, totally volunteer-run survivor advocacy campaign that was to comprise the five of us until May 2013, when JFM formally stepped down the campaign to become Justice for Magdalenes Research (JFMR).¹⁵

The campaign ran relentlessly for nearly 4 years and its strategies were simple but exhaustive.¹⁶ James Smith worked in various archives to produce manifold examples of state involvement in the Magdalene institutions. Smith disclosed evidence that: (a) many state departments were regularly involved in providing lucrative state contracts to the religious
orders; (b) the courts sentenced girls and women, and seemed never to follow up in securing their release at the end of sentences; (c) the Gardaí searched for escapees and returned them to the Magdalenes; (d) girls and women were sent from residential schools, County Homes and Mother and Baby Homes; and (e) the agencies of the state that might be presumed to have responsibility towards the women and girls abdicated their legal responsibilities. JFM continued to present this information to politicians across all parties and to foster support particularly among opposition politicians. The campaign also maintained constant attention to the Magdalene issue by tabling Parliamentary Questions (PQs). By this mechanism, politicians in the opposition asked questions to the government ministers in charge of relevant departments whereby those ministers had to reveal information held by the Civil Service that detailed state involvement with the system of Magdalene institutions. These replies became part of the Dáil record and therefore available to the public. The PQs were also used to ask ministers to comment on the increasing evidence of state involvement, and maintained crucial political pressure by keeping the opposition parties informed on the Magdalene issue—parties we knew would be returned to government in the next election, as the Fianna Fáil-led government that was in power in 2009 was the most unpopular in the history of the state.17

JFM ran a successful media campaign, building relationships with journalists in trusted national and international publications and broadcast stations which ensured that JFM press releases became news. When those Magdalene stories ran internationally, we knew that Irish state officials, ever susceptible to feelings of post-colonial inadequacy under the gaze of other (former colonial) nations, would be prompt to make a conciliatory response. JFM also ran a successful public education campaign via public presentations on its work and opinion pieces for national publications. Gaining public support and trust was further enhanced through strong alliances with four NGOs: Public Interest Law Alliance (PILA), the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL), Amnesty International-Ireland and in particular the National Women’s Council of Ireland (NWCI), who joined with us in lobbying efforts, presenting a united front to media outlets. Rachel Doyle of the NWCI orchestrated a campaign by writing to local government women councillors urging them to table motions of support for the JFM campaign. JFM in turn forwarded each county council motion of support to government ministers and all TDs representing that particular locale. Mari Steed has professional expertise in technology, and the JFM website, social media and press releases had the appearance of a well-funded
large organisation. James Smith and Maeve O’Rourke began to make legal and human rights arguments that initially found a sympathetic hearing and support from the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC). Their application for an enquiry into the Magdalenes led to a substantive report published in November 2010 recommending that the government conduct a formal investigation (Irish Human Rights Commission 2010).

Maeve O’Rourke took the case of the Irish Magdalenes to the United Nations and the campaign began to gather significant momentum at home, and abroad, when, in May 2011, the United Nations Committee Against Torture (CAT) issued robust questions for the Secretary General of the Irish Department of Justice, who seemed rather unprepared in his response. Sean Aylward replied that the women and even the girls who were held in the Magdalene Laundries ‘went there voluntarily’ and that in any case ‘these alleged events happened in most cases a considerable time ago, in privately run institutions’ (Aylward 2011; United Nations Committee Against Torture 2011). In using the word ‘voluntarily’ the Secretary General may have been attempting to refer to the voluntary sector or community sector (also known as non-profit or ‘not-for-profit’ sector). The Irish establishment has become habituated to referring to state-supported/Catholic Church-run activities in this manner, as if the Catholic Church in Ireland is a purely charitable or non-governmental organisation (NGO) entirely separate from a secular state, when in fact Catholic religious orders have functioned as if they were commercial or private operators, generating considerable revenue streams through state sponsorship. The acting Chairperson of the Committee, Felice Gaer, strongly questioned the Irish state’s assertions that women and girls ‘volunteered’ to be locked up and work for no pay, under conditions of extreme deprivation and with punishment for non-compliance. Gaer reminded the Secretary General that Magdalene survivors are still living, and that the definition of ‘voluntary’ presumes that one is free to leave a situation. She further remarked that ‘[a]n act of torture may also arise from an act of omission and not just a positive act. So this appears to include failure to inspect or regulate the place where acts of torture occurred … wouldn’t this apply to the Magdalene Laundries?’ (Gaer 2011). Mari Steed ensured that the live video-streaming of CAT was widely viewed, and she succeeded in recording and circulating the highlights and low points of the Irish state’s performance at the UN, which were widely shared on social media, exciting strong national and international concern and commentary.
The expected change in government took place in early March; the significant UN CAT hearings took place in May, and an Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of state involvement with the Magdalene Laundries (IDC) was established on 14 June 2011, just over a week after the Committee against Torture issued its recommendations signalling grave concern in relation to Ireland’s Magdalene institutions and demanding that the state provide redress (Department of Justice and Equality 2011). Senator Martin McAleese was appointed independent Chair of the IDC, and JFM co-operated fully—meeting to discuss the investigation, arranging meetings with survivors, providing other witnesses, emailing archival and other documentary evidence and so on—over the course of 20 months before it eventually reported on 5 February 2013 (Department of Justice and Equality 2013). The previous September, JFM presented the IDC with its 145-page principal submission, which demonstrated how, in relation to the Magdalene institutions and the women incarcerated there, the Irish state had broken or failed to uphold domestic law, had breached the Irish constitution and had contravened international treaties (particularly those relating to human rights). The submission was cross-referenced to 3707 pages of documentary evidence and 795 pages of survivor and other witness testimony gathered by JFM. It was written with the invaluable expertise of a British barrister, Raymond Hill, who generously donated weeks of work (Justice for Magdalenes 2012). Enda Kenny gave a state apology to the Magdalene women on 19 February 2013, and the following May the state agreed to implement a comprehensive ex gratia redress scheme for survivors, which was developed by Justice Quirke (2013).

**RISKY BEHAVIOUR: ACADEMICS BECOMING ACTIVISTS**

I piloted a project to collect oral histories of Magdalene women in March 2012 as a JFM exercise which would record survivor testimony to submit to the IDC. In drawing up the questions, I changed the focus from concentrating on what would be important to know from a legal point of view to taking the opportunity to gather life stories from the women. The ensuing oral histories were elicited through a long list of questions which had benefited from rigorous critiques by UCD’s College of Human Science’s Ethics Committee before they ultimately gave their sanction to the work. In considering what questions to ask, I aimed to collect as full a life story as possible, and so each interview began with ‘where were you born and
who raised you?’ Early in the pilot phase (funded by the Feminist Review Trust), I added closing questions that focused on the women’s sense of accomplishment and pride, both to end the interview with a recollection of positive achievements and also to capture the remarkable generosity and resilience of these women. A few of the questions on daily life within the Magdalenes were very specific, such as whether they remembered washing any kinds of uniforms (in order to ascertain if they recalled laundry that could be tied to state contracts given to the religious orders). However, most of the questions were open-ended and chronological in terms of charting a life story. The aim was to capture as rich an experience as possible of the former Magdalene woman’s life even if the central focus were the years of her incarceration. By aiming to collect life histories, I sought to generate a rich collection of narratives that would inform future generations, inspire artists and provide enough material for the work of historians and social scientists in their analyses of the interviews. While I understood that a collection of the oral histories of former Magdalene women would be of immense benefit to researchers and the heritage of the wider Irish public, I am not by training or inclination a social scientist and I was sceptical that there would be any benefit to the women themselves in having their histories recorded and disseminated. It seemed that I was inviting them to give the precious gift of their life story to a culture and society which had consistently degraded them; it was asking an enormous generosity on their part. The most immediate and overriding practical issue was that, once I collected a testimony, I was overwhelmed with feelings of fear, grief and horror. I had never felt these emotions with such distinction. I learned that each of these emotions has a different quality with quite particular physical, emotional and psychic registers and effects. I was made incapable by the intensity of these three emotions which, though different, seemed to simultaneously arise in me and rack through me in heaving waves. A key coping mechanism was to keep working hard on various aspects of the campaign because, if I had any time when I was not busy, I found that I got ill, and had to lie down with a debilitating fatigue that could last as long as a weekend. This illness seemed to me to have ethical ramifications—if I could not stay healthy, how was I going to be able to do the necessary work?

The testimonies I was gathering were stories of trauma, and I found it traumatic to gather them. In the scholarly work that is emerging on Irish Magdalene institutions, there are some who draw on the concept of ‘shame cultures’ to discuss and interpret the issue.19 Although this might
be an interesting perspective to consider when seeking to understand some of the dimensions of survivors’ experiences, the concept of shame is not sufficient to understand the reality of the lives of the girls and women in the Magdalenes, whose experience there was one of unremitting fear, confusion and often despair. Shame is a concept that describes a social relationship, but the girls and women who found themselves in the Magdalenes were ostracised; they no longer had a place in the social structure: the Magdalenes were places of secrecy and terror.

Perhaps the central philosophical question that has arisen following the mid-twentieth century with the supreme refinement in the technology of genocide has been how to know the pain of the other. One of the key experiences I had in recording the testimonies of the Magdalene women was what the scholarly literature calls ‘vicarious trauma’: the feelings I had were confusion, grief and horror, which came in intermittent waves. Above all, I began to realise that I had acquired a fear that seemed to have become a near-constant presence. I seemed to have these feelings by inspiration and from what I imagined was a ghostly contagion from the historical sensations that the women had experienced in those institutions; those feelings that still remained as part of their present-day experiences. I did not ‘identify with’ the Magdalenes, and indeed a large part of my horror stemmed from my identification with the religious sisters. If I had been born 10 years earlier, I could easily imagine that I would have been a well-intentioned Irish nun, and this certain identification added to my sensations of confusion, grief and horror. On beginning to work on the JFM campaign, I realised that I was more comfortable in the company of nuns than former Magdalenes. With the nuns I shared a middle-class background, a class perspective and cultural assumptions. I have always admired nuns and have felt an affinity with them due to the deeply happy and rewarding experiences I associate with my own Catholic and convent-educated upbringing. With the nuns I shared the identity of a respected, empowered citizen of the Irish state, at least protected by—if not always part of—the Irish establishment. It seemed necessary to break that imaginative identification with the religious sisters. Yet, for as long as I set myself that task, I failed at it because to break the affinity I felt with the nuns would mean to significantly revise my relationship to many of the coordinates by which I navigated my own life, and to revise my own history. I would have to begin to understand again how I had arrived at my position within my own society and culture. I began to realise that while a certain amount of the pain I was feeling might be termed ‘vicarious trauma’, there
were also sensations that were solely my own, as I struggled to comprehend how the Magdalene institutions had flourished in my time and in my country. After all, I had returned to living in Dublin, and was working as a feminist academic; I turned 30 years of age just months after the closure of the last Magdalene institution in Dublin, but never noticed that event. I needed to face the structure of my ignorance and the complicity of this ignorance in my unawareness. I was going to have to bring a curious attention to those feelings of horror, grief and fear, because it was precisely those moments when I had that affective response that would allow me to begin to apprehend the contours of what had led to my incapacity to respond in previous decades. This would allow me, in turn, to find the signposts to study how the ignorance around the Magdalenes had been maintained in my time and culture. Any study of the suffering of the Magdalenes must entail a study of Irish society’s refusal to acknowledge the pain and violence that was inflicted on them. I realised that, in collecting the oral histories of the Magdalene women, I had an opportunity to realise how Irish sexual and gender politics are inflected by class positions and how I am implicated and privileged in those politics. I had an opportunity to understand better how power works and my place in the structure. I stopped reading about ‘vicarious trauma’, and started to reread feminist literary and cultural scholars who are expert at attentively engaging with trauma that affects entire cultures.

Simultaneously, I changed my focus in approaching the Magdalene women and began to regard them as authors, creators of their life stories. What was demanded of me was to pay attention to their position as agents; they were not merely victims but also survivors who had managed—against dire odds—to flourish in various ways in their lives. I was to pay attention to the ways in which their narratives made me feel uncomfortable. In those moments when I did not want to hear, I would have an opportunity to reflect not merely on what this revealed about the prejudicial warp and weft of my own consciousness and unconsciousness, but what this aversion to apprehension told me about what could be known and not known in the society and culture that shaped me. I consciously approached the event of the interview as if I was going to attend a theatrical event. Stanley Cavell writes that the first virtue of philosophy is responsiveness; he says that ‘philosophy does not speak first’ (Cavell 2007, p. xiv). I took his observation to heart as advice, and I began to feel confidence in my training as a literary scholar and historian of ideas. I called this new attitude to interviewing an ‘aesthetic approach’ or a ‘reparative’ awareness; by that I meant
that I brought the same qualities of receptive attention to interviewing the former Magdalenes that I would normally bring to appreciating a work of art. The approach brought immediate positive results in that I stopped getting ill; I began to let the women tell their histories as they saw fit; I spoke far less and they spoke more widely and for longer. If my voice was heard, it was merely to prompt them on topics from the questionnaire I had drawn up that I imagined might be useful for historical or social analyses and that remained unaddressed in their narratives. In short, I let myself be guided by their willingness to share their experience. Their startling generosity and trust that they would be heard led me to a stillness which enabled me to simply listen.

I borrow the term ‘reparative’ from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who coined the phrase ‘reparative reading’ to describe the kind of response sought by artists (Sedgwick 2003, pp. 123–152).21 A ‘reparative reading’ places an accent on noticing what is immediately present, on being affected, on taking joy in an ability to be affected and be partial. A ‘reparative reading’ seeks to incorporate the contagion of emotion, by acknowledging feelings and their somatic impact. Such a reading feeds theories that are rich in description and attentive in local and minute ways. It enables us to work towards representing the felt affect and construing knowledge that is informed by considering the emotions. For Sedgwick, a ‘reparative reading’ contrasts with what she calls the ‘paranoid reading’ of familiar academic protocols like maintaining impartiality, or adopting a clinical and critical distance. ‘Paranoid reading’ tends to assume that success is a finite resource available to those who win it through competition, and so ‘paranoid readings’ seek to outsmart, undermine and undo the work of others who toil within the boundaries of the discipline. Such readings transmit a belief in hierarchy, maintain the boundaries of the discipline and aim to become that number one.22 ‘Paranoid reading’, as described by Sedgwick, is a way of disavowing affect in order to claim ownership over truth.

As I continued with the interviews, I became more convinced that the most ethical way for me to proceed was not to analyse the interviews. I also realised that the interviews had to be freely available to the public—I would never anthologise those voices. I thought less of myself as a master exposer and more as someone who was honoured to be exposed to their narratives and who had begun to learn more by reflecting on my reactive emotions. I cannot say that I empathised with their stories—I did not wilfully grasp to share in their emotion. In fact, most of the narratives are quite matter of fact and do not expressly seek to engender an emotional
response. The former Magdalene women simply want to be heard, and trust that in being heard their experiences will have a resonance—that they will resound within the hearers, and that resonance will have the effect (by as yet unknown means) of making a better world than the one that they endured. They were grateful to me and to the other interviewers on the project for honouring them by listening. Before I adopted the ‘reparative’ approach, I felt this gratitude as another burden, as I worried that their histories would not find either a respectful or favourable response with the Irish establishment. Through the ‘reparative’ approach, it seemed that even the event of recording and the effort entailed in transcribing, redacting and publishing the testimonies could perhaps be honour enough for their testimony.

If I were to give a definition of ethics, I would concur with the truism that it is a system of thinking needed by those of us who are not already virtuous. Academic disciplines improve our ability to think systematically and analyse and reason methodically, yet one of the aspects of philosophy in general, and the sub-field of ethics in particular, that makes it distinct from other academic disciplines, is that the practice of thinking philosophically enables us to become better habituated to living a good life and creating a good society. My understanding of philosophy, then, is that it is profoundly ethical: that it is about what is at risk in making and unmaking relations. Should we want to state what the central tenets of feminist philosophy might be, one of the key claims could be that our knowledge production is utterly determined and formed by the contexts in which it is produced. What we use to inform determines our knowledge: when we fail to include a reflection on our emotional reactions to the material we encounter in our thinking, then we limit the reach and efficacy of that thinking. When we fail to reflect on our relationship to what we study—how we are exposed—we limit the exposure of our knowledge. A further and related central claim of feminist philosophy is that our sense and expression of our selves is conditioned; that is, that our ‘selves’ come into being through, with, because of others. We are who we are through the relationships that create us; the meaning and effect of our lives can only be understood in how we are positioned in relation to others.

Both ‘paranoid’ and ‘reparative’ readings are powerful responses to managing the anxiety of relationships: of being exposed and undone; of being vulnerable. Our inherent corporeal vulnerability to being wounded and to violence is the same vulnerability: an openness necessary to make relations to the world, to the finitude of others’ lives, and to impermanent life in
general. As Judith Butler reminds us, vulnerability is not a self-referential way of being but rather ‘characterises a relation to a field of objects, and passions that impinge on or affect us in some way’ (Butler 2016, p. 12). Vulnerability is fundamental to intimacy, to giving and receiving affection. The former Magdalene women are among the most economically, politically, socially and culturally vulnerable people in Ireland; yet their testimonies are powerful in their demand on us to witness, to understand how we are inter-related, to comprehend what it is to have a body that can feel pain—our own and that of other sentient beings. We can either acknowledge their pain (that is, bring our senses to their experience), or we can avoid it. In avoiding the pain of the Magdalene women, we insist again that we will never turn towards them in an attentive silence, to listen, to make a careful response. We must know that whatever choice we make determines how we share and shape the future.

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NOTES

2. ‘Occasions of sin’ are defined in the teachings of the Catholic Church as those conditions where someone may be most likely to be incited or enticed into committing sin, that is breaking a precept of Church teaching.
3. During the early months of the Saorstát (from June 1922 to May 1923), those who held political power crushed their erstwhile brothers-in-arms in a civil war over whether or not to accept the treaty terms with the British government. That war saw 77 anti-Treaty Irish Republican soldiers executed by the soldiers of the Saorstát, a figure that is brought into stark relief when we realise that British forces executed just 14 Irish Republican Army (IRA) volunteers during the War of Independence. In order to become recognised as legitimate governors by the British colonial power and by other nations, the leaders of the Saorstát Executive Council argued that they had to exert total control over the military. As W.T. Cosgrave (1880–1965), the first President of the Executive Council of the Saorstát, declared: ‘I am not going to hesitate if the country is to live, and if we have
to exterminate ten thousand Republicans, the three million of our people is greater than this ten thousand’ (Houses of the Oireachtas 1922).

4. The vast majority (over 90 per cent) of primary schools in Ireland are owned and under the patronage of the Catholic Church. The two main teaching hospitals of University College Dublin (that is the Mater and St Vincent’s) are still run according to a Catholic ethos. The redress scheme that is mentioned is that created under the Residential Institutional Redress Board (RIRB), and the two religious orders are the Sisters of Mercy, which still owes €24.9 million to the fund, and the Religious Sisters of Charity, which owes €3 million. Religious orders involved in institutional child abuse paid €209 million in redress to survivors but current costs to the state—including an inquiry, a survivor redress scheme and related survivor supports—add up to €1.5 billion (so the orders involved have paid less than 14 per cent of the total cost). These orders have refused to apologise to the Magdalene women or pay any money into the Magdalene Redress Scheme. The Religious Sisters of Charity have recently been handed sole ownership of the Irish National Maternity Hospital in spite of concerns on the part of the Institute of Obstetricians in Ireland. See Hogan (2016) and Cullen (2017). This has led to a public outcry that may see the decision overturned, which would be a significant historical shift in the power balance of the Irish establishment.

5. These articles were completely revised by means of an amendment which took effect on 2 December 1999, under a process to recognise what is popularly known as the Good Friday Agreement. As amended, they grant the right to be ‘part of the Irish Nation’ to all of those born on the island of Ireland, and express a desire for the peaceful political unification of the island subject to the consent of the peoples of Northern Ireland and Ireland.

6. Symphysiotomy is the cutting apart of the cartilage of the pubic bone. This operation, which is very rare in modern medicine, was regularly performed in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda until the 1980s in preference to caesarean sections, supposedly as the latter would entail that women would not be able to have more than two or three pregnancies and this would mean they would require contraception, in contravention of Catholic Church teaching.

7. See Price (2010).

8. There is excellent work by feminist historians on the status and oppression of women in the founding of the Saorstát. See for example, McAvoy (1999), Valiulis (1995a, 1995b) and Ryan (1998, 1999).


11. These two orders could trace their lineage back to a convent founded in Caen, France by Fr. Eudes in 1641. Following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), these congregations of sisters followed the encouragement of the Council to renew their original charism (mission) and retitled themselves the Union of Our Lady of Charity and Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd. In 2007 both congregations began to develop formal dialogue which resulted in a merger decree in 2014, formalising the unification of the two congregations. The Good Shepherds also operated institutions in the North of Ireland.


13. Those who have been adopted under that regime are still not allowed an automatic right of access to their adoption files, and thus to their identity.

14. For a more complete discussion of the dishonoured dead, see Anne Enright (2015).


17. This was partly due to the fact that the Fianna Fáil party was popularly held to blame for severely mismanaging the Irish Celtic Tiger economy. The boom times had become a spectacular bust, with a ‘Troika’ comprised of the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the European Union dictating a swingeing austerity policy.

18. See also United Nations Committee Against Torture (2011). O’Rourke continues to take the lead in presenting and following up on the Magdalene issue with UN bodies, particularly in relation to failures to meet the terms of the redress scheme as outlined by Justice Quirke and the failure of the state to establish an appropriate enquiry into the abuses in the Magdalene Institutions and hold people accountable for those abuses. The Irish state now has to answer to ongoing reviews by UN fora such as CAT, the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the UN Periodical Review on Human Rights, the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

19. For a good example of this approach see Clara Fischer (2016). In contrast, the work of Sheila Killen (2015)—which uses Bourdieu’s ideas on the logic of price—is able to reveal the power structure of the Magdalene institu-
tions, whereby the Magdalene women were ‘accounted for’ within the institution as dehumanised entities and where ‘accounting to them’ as people was unthinkable.

20. There are many examples of literature that addresses vicarious trauma; some useful reading includes Batson et al. (1987), and McCann and Pearlman (1990).


22. Sedgwick reminds us that the ‘first imperative of paranoia is: there must be no bad surprises’ (2003, p. 130). According to Sedgwick, paranoia works to anticipate and to ward off negative feeling, in particular ‘the negative affect of humiliation’ (p. 145). ‘Paranoid reading’ is described as rigid, grim, single-minded, self-defeating, circular, reductive, hypervigilant, scouringly thorough, contemptuous, sneering, risk-averse, cruel, monopolistic and terrible. Sedgwick acknowledges that a ‘paranoid’ reading organises large amounts of information, tells big truths and produces strong theory. Nevertheless, Sedgwick also argues that this strong theory would work better to ‘interdigitate’ with the weak theory of the ‘reparative’.

23. This fear proved to be true in that the Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee (aka The McAleese Report) did not quote any of the 796 pages of the women’s testimonies submitted to the inquiry and paid almost no attention to any of the meetings we had organised between the Committee and the Magdalene Survivors (Department of Justice and Equality 2013). Instead (most particularly in Chap. 19) it sought to undermine the women’s experiences by allowing written statements from nuns, a doctor and former manager of a laundry, and women who ran a Women Survivors Group in London to present the truth of the Magdalene institutions.

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