Presence of Absence: Black Children and Erased Histories of Abuse in Ireland's Institutional Record

Phil Mullen*

*Correspondence: mpmullen@tcd.ie

Abstract

This article examines the erasure of Black children from public discourse on 20th-century Irish institutional abuse, situating their exclusion within a racial logic that marked them as morally and biologically other. It interrogates the epistemic and testimonial injustices embedded within Ireland's historical and contemporary treatment of Black children, with particular focus on the 2021 Mother and Baby Homes Commission. It critiques the reliance on institutional records over survivor testimonies, revealing how these children's racialisation intersected with gender and class to marginalise them within both care institutions and national memory. By employing an intersectional and feminist framework, it explores the implications of these omissions for transitional justice and human rights accountability, calling for the inclusion of racialised narratives in Ireland's reckoning with its institutional past. This study advances a critical understanding of racial injustice within Ireland's care system, advocating for reparatory justice and the centring of Black survivors' voices in processes of historical redress and collective memory formation.

Keywords: Blackness in Ireland, Racialised Erasure, Institutional abuse, Epistemic silencing, Testimonial injustice

Introduction

The erasure of children of African and Irish descent from Ireland's record of historical institutional abuse in the 20th century represents a failure to confront the racialised dimensions of systemic violence within the state. Framed as both moral and racial threats, these children were positioned as monoracially Black (in keeping with their fathers' blackness[i]) and faced

decades of epistemic silencing, a deleterious process evident even in the most recent 2021 report into institutional abuse (MBH, 2021). In discussing the erasure of the on-going Gazan genocide, Francesca Albanese, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967, observed that '[e]pistemic violence comes in many, often subliminal and surreptitious, forms' (Albanese, 2024). The Albanese quote highlights the subtle and pervasive nature of epistemic violence that operates not only through overt denial but also through omission and selective silencing. This dynamic is evident in the Irish context, where the presence of Black children in care institutions has been systematically omitted from public consciousness and historical narratives, reinforcing the myth of a racially homogeneous nation. This erasure is not incidental but reflects a deliberate mechanism of marginalisation that has left even survivors questioning the legitimacy of their own lived experiences. One of the consistent responses to my research and public engagement on my own experiences in the institutional care system is the inevitable comment along the lines of, 'I never knew there were any Black children in the institutions'. As a child made visible through race over sixteen years, spent in two industrial schools, I find myself reflecting on how my story, and those of multiple others like me, have disappeared 'down some collective black hole' (Cohen, 2001, p.13).

While survivors marked by race can be glimpsed in public documentaries and multiple official reports on the institutional care system (e.g., CICA, 2009), it was not until the publication of the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters (henceforth MBH) published in January 2021 (MBH, 2021), that the scale of this cohort's presence became clear. Records from just two institutions, Pelletstown and Bessborough[ii], revealed that 275 children were classified as Black or 'mixed' race[iii] (MBH, 2021, p.74). This figure, drawn from a small sample of 18 institutions within the Commission's remit, confirmed a substantial Black presence across the institutional sector, one that remains largely unacknowledged in public discourse. As with so many matters relating to the institutions, it would be an easy task to determine accurate numbers for the Black and 'mixed' individuals who lived and died in these institutions. When I received my heavily redacted personal files, I discovered that, in addition to the term 'illeg(itimate)' after my name, the word 'coloured' had been scrawled as addendum across the page as a marker for any staff within the system, a clear signifier of my racialised identity (see Figure 1). My research among other Black survivors confirms that such racialised labelling was a

common practice (Mullen, 2021a), and that we were stamped from the beginning, to use Ibram X. Kendi's (2016) phrase. Given this context, it would seem a straightforward task, with the allocation of even limited resources, to identify the total number of Black and racialised as Other[iv] adults and children who were incarcerated, provided the religious orders that ran these institutions were minded to open their archives to scrutiny.

Figure 1: Early racialisation within the institutions. Note the handwritten word 'coloured' which is in another hand than the official one used elsewhere on the form.

Yet, despite the evidence of significant numbers, these narratives of racialisation in an Irish context remain largely absent from public discourse on the institutions. Interestingly, from a Black feminist perspective, one of the rare mentions of 'coloured' children which appears in a government report, the 2000-2009 Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (CICA), adopts a disturbing gendered approach. Reporting on a Dr. Lysaght who lamented the plight of 'coloured' girls during the course of his visit to an industrial school in 1966, it quotes from his observations:

> *their future especially in the case of girls presented a problem difficult of any satisfactory solution. Their prospects of marriage especially in this country are practically nil and their future happiness and welfare can only be assured in a country with a fair multi-racial population, since they are not well received by either 'black or white' …these unfortunate children who are frequently found hot tempered and difficult to control. The coloured boys do not present quite the same problem. (CICA, 2009, at Vol. IV para 4.94)*

These racialised girls were marked as Other in ways that rendered them hypervisible and as problems to be managed, while their lived realities were systematically erased from collective memory. This dual process of hypervisibility and erasure aligns with Audrey Rousseau's concept of the 'presence of absence' (2016, p.309) which characterises the

contradictory ways in which survivors appear in institutional narratives—as objects of bureaucratic concern but never as subjects of their own stories.

Viewing the institutions through an intersectional lens, where intersectionality is understood not as an additive process but as a mutually constitutive framework in which systems of oppression and identity categories co-produce one another, reveals the mechanisms behind this erasure. This erasure stems not only from the racialised hierarchies within Ireland's institutional care system (Mullen, 2023) but also the patriarchal logics of control that shaped the intersections of gender and class to sustain their operation (Gleeson, 2020). These institutions operated within a patriarchal Ireland, where, as Clara Fischer observes, 'women's sexuality and social behaviour were subjected to intense scrutiny, as visible transgressions of purity, especially, were met with opprobrium and punishment' in the early twentieth century (2016, p.823). Engaging with feminist critiques of power and human rights frameworks, this article foregrounds these hidden narratives as a challenge to both Ireland's self-concept and its international commitments to justice. It examines the mechanisms of their marginalisation and the implications for transitional justice, collective memory and Irish identity, calling for an intersectional approach to reckon with these abuses within a historical redress and ongoing human rights accountability framework.

In relation to terminology, it is germane to note that in the Irish context, the 'racial definers' (Moriarty, 2020, p.1) used to describe individuals of 'mixed' backgrounds have been the subject of extensive and critical debate (e.g., Mullen, 2024) reflecting the problematic conceptualisation of 'Irish as same and other/mixed as different' (Moriarty, 2020, p. 11). For the purposes of this discussion, I will employ the term Black (capitalised) in describing these children of African and Irish descent to acknowledge the socio-political significance of the construct of being racialised as Black. This usage aligns with critical frameworks that centre blackness as a site of both resistance and marginalisation, while simultaneously recognising the limitations and contested nature of racial terminology. By doing so, I foreground the lived experiences and structural conditions that render blackness a crucial analytical category within the Irish context, particularly for individuals racialised as such.

Background to the institutional care system

From the mid-19th century to the late 20th century, a nationwide network of industrial, residential and reformatory schools, children's homes, Mother and Baby homes, Magdalene laundries and orphanages were used to incarcerate those deemed morally deviant or socially undesirable, including the poor, unmarried mothers, and their children (Earner-Byrne, 2007). This 'architecture of containment' (Smith, 2007, p.1) was State-sponsored and Church-administered (Gleeson, 2020), supported by various institutions such as the medical profession, the courts, the police, politicians, social workers, families, and voluntary organisations (Garrett, 2003). It was designed to contain those perceived as threats to the moral order, particularly by disciplining and punishing women and children who transgressed conventional gender and moral expectations (Garrett, 2016). The primary function of homes for unmarried mothers was to regulate women's sexuality and way of life. Protestant institutions, mirroring Catholic ones, confirm that this was a nationwide phenomenon rooted in an entrenched social governance that treated poverty as a moral failing (Buckley, 2016).

Neglect was used as a blanket term to justify institutionalisation, encompassing a wide array of conditions tied to poverty and family dysfunction. Raftery and O'Sullivan (1999) contend that poverty was the root cause of institutionalisation:

> *Approximately eighty per cent of all children committed, and over ninety per cent of girls, came under the category 'lack of proper guardianship'. In practice, this was a catch-all heading, which included children of unmarried mothers not eligible for adoption, children who had lost one or both parents, those whose parents were incapacitated through illness, or whose families were unable to look after them due to poverty. Homeless children came within this category, as did those whose families had been broken up because of desertion or the imprisonment of one parent. However, in all these cases, the language and procedure of the courts was to place the onus of guilt on the child. And the State, rather than attempting to address the poverty that existed in these families, chose instead to fund religious orders to effectively incarcerate these children (Raftery & O'Sullivan, 1999, p. 22).*

Rooted in a 'culture of honour towards the Church and its agents' (Richards, 2012, p. 395) this approach reshaped the social roots of

poverty into moral issues (Finnane, 2001). Viewed through the lens of Catholic social teaching, poverty became then not a structural issue but a reflection of individual or familial shortcomings, necessitating control and reform rather than support (Fahey 1998). The family was seen as central to Irish identity, but only within a narrowly defined, patriarchal model that excluded unmarried mothers and their children (Brennan, 2013). This system also reflected 20th century Ireland's wider coercive confinement strategy, which targeted the surplus, deviant, and undesirable elements of society (O'Sullivan & O'Donnell, 2012) resulting in approximately one per cent of the population of the state being incarcerated in state institutions. Along with mass emigration, this institutionalisation 'absorbed the surplus, deviant and 'undesirable' in society' (Buckley & McGregor, 2019, p.4).

The institutional care regime continued as an entrenched feature of Irish everyday life, operating well into the late 20th century. This longevity reflects a pernicious economic reality about the institutions, namely that they relied on the labour of the incarcerated, where this labour was exploited under the guise of care and required a steady supply of new inmates to remain financially viable according to state capitation grant mechanisms (CICA, 2009; MBH, 2021). To take a particularly trenchant critique of one form of institution, the Magdalen Laundries, Frances Finnegan makes a case that the gradual closure of these abusive institutions from the late 1970s owed less to reforming legislation, public concern, or liberal debate within a modernising Irish society, and more to a Gradgrindian utilitarianism on the part of the nuns driven by the increasing adoption of domestic washing machines beyond the institutions' walls (2002, p.113).

Blackness in Ireland

Though Ireland's self-construction as a monocultural and monoracial society is riddled with contradictions, particularly given its dual identity as both colonised and coloniser within the British imperial matrix of power (McMahon et al. 2017), this dynamic has historically erased Black people from Ireland's national narrative. As a colonised nation, Ireland was racialised as 'other' within British colonial discourse, often portrayed as inherently inferior and likened to racialised groups within the empire (Garner, 2004). Yet, as a nation engaged in missionary activities in Africa, Ireland simultaneously adopted the role of 'soft coloniser' (Mullen, 2024) disseminating Catholicism and Irish cultural values while participating in

the racial hierarchies of empire. This duality complicates Ireland's victim narrative and highlights its role in the racialisation of others, particularly Black people, through its involvement in racial-colonial projects.

The paradox of Ireland's racial positioning becomes evident in the ways blackness has been constructed within Irish society. Connolly and Khaoury (2008) argue that whiteness has historically been a foundational element of Irishness which reinforces the racialised inscription of space. Far from being a mere product of external colonial forces, the racialisation of Black people in Ireland reflects internalised colonial logics that sought to secure Irish whiteness as normative. This dynamic has not only excluded Black individuals from the imagined Irish community but also framed their presence as incompatible with Irishness, which is equated with whiteness to the point of metonymy. This exclusion, as O'Malley (2020, p.935) observes, is rooted in this 'normative whiteness,' which situates whiteness as the essential marker of belonging within the Irish nation. Blackness, by contrast, is relegated to a position of otherness, often perceived as foreign or uncanny. This uncanny quality reflects Freud's concept of unsettling familiarity, where blackness disrupts the presumed homogeneity of Irish identity and operates as a mechanism for reinforcing Irish whiteness while simultaneously constructing blackness as invisible in the national narrative (Mullen, 2024).

This invisibility leads to a prevalent misconception that there were no Black people in Ireland during this period in question. Such a belief is especially striking given that from the 1930s onwards, hundreds of colonial students and professionals such as doctors and engineers from several African states came to work and study in Irish institutions of higher education. A project I am leading, for example, has identified over 700 African students in Trinity College Dublin alone during this time period. This community of scholars, male and female, played a significant role on the Irish social scene and global political stage, as reflected in newspaper reports of the time, yet their contributions and experiences remain largely absent from the historical record. An enduring legacy of the arrival of these students was the hundreds of Black children born to white Irish mothers and these African or Caribbean fathers. 'The children born of relationships between African men and Irish women experienced not just the stigma experienced by other unmarried mothers but also extreme racism' (Fanning, 2018), and the double stigma of being an unmarried mother with a Black child meant many of these mothers were compelled to hand their children to the care of the Irish State for

adoption or fostering. There were, of course, women who refused to sign away their children for adoption and managed to bring up their child, but with huge difficulties. The African and Caribbean fathers also faced the risk of being expelled from employment or educational institutions if it was discovered they had fathered an illegitimate child with a white woman. This was, in turn, compounded by cultural and societal expectations from their countries of origin, which could include condemnation or estrangement from their families.

Despite the contestation of blackness in Ireland during this time period, what is incontestable is the antiblackness. In 1964, *The Irish Times* newspaper ran a series of articles on African students in Ireland, in which the severe racism faced by these students in Dublin was described, putting a spotlight on the pervasive antiblackness they were obliged to endure, especially from landlords. In a letter responding to the series, an African student studying in Dublin, E.C.D. Ekanem, suggested that the root of the problem lay in the fact that in Ireland, 'one is bound to admit that the general attitude is that of suspicion and dislike, for no apparent reason than that they are black, as if black were an unpopular colour' (The Irish Times, 1964). By the time the sociologist, Fr Micheál Mac Gréil, conducted his 1972 survey of attitudes to racial and ethnic difference, his 3,000 Dublin participants revealed 'a high and severe degree' of animosity regarding Black people (Mac Gréil, 1977, p.244) confirming this pervasive antiblackness decades before Ireland's Celtic Tiger-era large scale inward migration of Africans in the mid-1990s.

Racialisation within the institutions

It is against this background of a prevalent antiblackness that the racialisation of Black children within the care institutions and their erasure from the record must be situated. Black children, as embodied disruptions to this monoracial identity, were systematically excluded from the national imaginary and its ethno-racial rigidity of Irishness. Unlike the overt segregation practised in settler-colonial contexts, Ireland's approach was more insidious, involving the geographic isolation of Black children in rural institutions and their removal from public consciousness[v]. A 1970s report by the Child Care Advisor in the Department of Education, Graham Granville, states: 'It would appear upon examination of the files etc. that in the past many of the children admitted to Clifden [in the 1970s an isolated region in the West of Ireland] were received into care to be removed 'out of sight out of mind'

(CICA, 2009, at 9.23-24). This policy in his opinion was applied especially to children of different racial backgrounds and ensured that no visible community of Black children could challenge the narrative of Ireland as a racially homogeneous nation.

The racialisation of Black children was inscribed in their records and the language of these institutions[vi]. Recording of a child's race in institutional records was not innocuous as I have outlined in my instance above, and served no purpose other than to draw attention to the phenotype of the child, resulting in their stigmatisation (Mullen, 2021b). I have argued that the language used in Ireland in the mid-later 20th century was reminiscent of Jim Crow America and U.S. segregation, as the Black and 'mixed' child was recorded as 'coloured,' 'half caste,' 'negro,' 'half negro,' 'dark skinned,' and 'African' (ibid., p.55). Such practices were not isolated but systematic, reflecting the racial hierarchies codified in institutional discourse. These descriptors reduced children to racialised categories, framing their bodies as defective, which appear to have hindered their chances of adoption. Of the 275 children who were in Pelletstown and Bessborough, where race is noted on their records over the period in question, only 56% were placed for adoption (Mullen, 2021b, p.55). There is clear evidence that these children would have been placed for adoption if they had been white: 'Coloured child. Healthy. Medically fit for adoption but owing to colour this would be difficult.' 'Healthy. Half caste child. On account of above will be unfit for adoption.' 'Healthy. Coloured child. Unfit for adoption on account of colour only' (ibid., p.56).

Children who were not adopted were likely to remain in institutions since they were devalued in this commodified marketisation of adoption. Deprived of the potential lucrative value of adoption, the remaining value of the Black child came from the capitation fee (a fee provided by the State to the industrial schools for the maintenance of the child), from whatever the mother was paying to the institution for the child's upkeep, and from being used as a labourer, both within and outside the institution. One form of this commodification of the Black child is evident by the disproportionate number of mixed-race children subjected to non-consensual vaccine trials during the mid-20th century. Despite the ethical standards established by the Nuremberg Code in 1947, which mandated informed consent and safeguards against the exploitation of vulnerable populations, Ireland's institutions targeted children labelled as illegitimate (Dwyer, 2018) or marked as racially other for these trials (Mullen, 2021a). These actions not only violated international ethical guidelines but also highlighted the racialised disregard for the dignity and

personhood of Black children within the institutional system. Black children were unwitting participants in both the vaccine trials recorded in Pelletstown (2 out of 14 children in the 1960/61 Quadrivax quadruple and 1 out of 20 in the Quintuple vaccine trial). A remarkable 23% (13 out of 56) children who received a course of oral polio vaccine in Pelletstown were described as 'half-caste' or 'coloured child' (Mullen, 2021b, p.56) This strongly suggests a policy of selection of racialised children and constitutes an abuse of human rights.

The devaluation of the Black child within the institutions is poignantly illustrated in Caelainn Hogan's 2019 *Republic of Shame: How Ireland Punished 'Fallen Women' and Their Children*. Hogan recounts an incident that exposes the racialised neglect inherent in these institutions:

> *When Liz was still a child, Betty took her and her sister (who was also adopted) to the orphanage in Blackrock, hoping to adopt another child. While the nun was showing Betty the babies in their cots, the kids wandered off to another room, where they followed the sound of crying to a closed closet. Inside they found a baby. 'A black baby crying on its own in the dark,' Jess remembered Liz telling her. The nun told Betty that the baby was sick and probably wouldn't make it. Betty decided that if the baby was going to die, she was going to die with a family. The baby girl lived and grew up to be her youngest aunt, Ana. (2019, p.173)*

The 1967 killing of Mary Josephine Stephenson, a six-year-old Black girl and industrial school inmate, epitomised this devaluation of Black children even after being placed in foster care. In a story that made front-page news (Waterford News and Star, 1968) Mary was killed by her foster father, Vincent Dunphy, who was drunk at the time, and who justified his violent behaviour by claiming she was 'difficult' and told lies. Neighbours had seen Mary with bruises and black eyes on a regular basis, evidence of sustained abuse, yet during the trial in 1968, the judge absolved Dunphy of full responsibility, suggesting that the child's death was an unintended consequence of disciplinary actions Dunphy believed appropriate. The defence counsel further diminished Mary's humanity, describing her as a 'waif and a stray, and a coloured one at that' (Irish Independent, 1968). This framing secured a verdict of manslaughter rather than murder and resulted in a lenient sentence of just 12 months in prison, demonstrating the systemic disregard for the dignity and value of Black children even beyond the walls of the institution.

Testimonial injustice and the Epistemic Silencing of Black Survivors

The exclusion of Black children from Ireland's institutional history, coupled with the moralistic punishment of unmarried mothers, was a sustained violation of human rights that exposes the influence of Church and state power embedded in shaping social governance in 20th century Ireland. This punitive structure portrayed unmarried mothers and their children as socially deviant (Gleeson, 2020), a framework in which exclusion functioned as sites of moral and, in the case of these Black children, racial containment and control, designed to isolate and punish those deemed transgressive to Irish racial imaginaries (read: white). This racialised dehumanisation is located in the acts of epistemic and testimonial injustice that rendered Black children invisible within institutional records and national memory. The refusal to name Black children in institutional documents, the prevention of burial rites for those who died in care, and their erasure from public discourse function as calculated denials of humanity. This pattern of exclusion presents an amplified politicisation of human rights, in which racialisation and moral governance worked in tandem to determine who was deemed worthy of recognition, belonging, and even life. By constructing Black children and their mothers as undeserving of memory or mourning, these practices not only violated principles of dignity and equality but normalised Ireland's racial modernity enmeshed in logics of whiteness and heteronormativity. The struggle to uncover these suppressed histories is not merely an act of historical recovery but an urgent human rights demand, one that insists on acknowledging the role of racism in the systemic pattern of institutional abuse through which state and Church colluded to deny Black children and their mothers the right to be seen, remembered, and valued as full members of Irish society.

The MBH commission established in 2015 to examine systemic abuses within these institutions, was tasked with uncovering the truth about the treatment of unmarried mothers and their children, including addressing questions of racial abuse as part of its terms of reference. This inclusion of race within the terms of reference was due solely to the advocacy of the Association of Mixed Race Irish (AMRI). Representing survivors racialised as Black and 'mixed' in Ireland's institutional care system, AMRI filed formal submissions to the MBH Commission during its scoping phase, with critical evidence of systemic racial abuse and discrimination arising from the testimonies of its network of survivors and through documentation that revealed racialisation within institutional records

and practices (AMRI 2019). This activism involved engagement with politicians to press for the inclusion of race and the leveraging of international human rights frameworks, particularly the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) to pressure the state to address its failure to include the racialised dimensions of institutional abuses in its initial analysis (ibid.).

Despite this inclusion, the MBH commission failed in its final report to identify race as a critical axis of analysis, treating it as peripheral rather than a systemic process shaping Black children's institutional experiences (Mullen, 2021b). The commission's approach and findings make public inherent methodological and interpretative biases that undermined its ability to confront the racialised dimensions of harm that characterise the epistemic violence entrenched within Ireland's institutional inquiries. Instead of framing racialisation as a manifestation of institutional racism, the MBH characterised it as both an isolated issue and simply a product of the societal context of the time, thereby neutralising its significance as a structural dynamic of the institutions. This is confounding, as leaked findings from survivors' testimonies that appeared in national newspapers in February 2020 directly contradicted the MBH's final conclusions, and exposed systemic racialisation and the centrality of race in shaping institutional practices (Sheehan, 2020). The religious orders running the institutions engaged in eugenic practices, assessing children based on perceived 'negroid' features and the supposed intelligence of their mothers to determine their suitability for adoption (O'Sullivan, 2020). This racial profiling maintained a narrative of blackness as subhuman and incompatible with Irish norms, effectively barring these children from adoption or fostering and relegating them to lifelong institutionalisation. The racialised human rights abuses extended to physical segregation within the institutions, with survivors recounting the existence of spaces like the 'reject ward' at St Patrick's Mother and Baby Home, where mixed-race and disabled children were grouped and subjected to abhorrent mistreatment (Maloney, 2020). One survivor described nuns dragging these children 'like rag dolls,' noting a grim pattern of disappearing cots as children died from neglect (ibid.), in a manner reminiscent of Ana's fate in Caelainn Hogan's account above. The findings also highlighted the deliberate erasure of children's ethnic identities, with the institutions using 'African' as a catch-all label. This lack of recognition denied the children their individuality and any cultural or familial connection, further isolating them within the institutional system as 'hidden aberrations to the norm' (AMRI, 2019, p.11), whose

very presence was suppressed to maintain the illusion of a racially homogeneous Ireland.

This methodological and interpretative bias was brought to light when Mary Daly, a historian and one of the MBH's three members, addressed an academic seminar at Oxford University in June 2021, five months after its report was published, and six years since the investigation began. This marked Daly's first public commentary since the publication and provoked widespread outrage among survivors, including AMRI and its members. Her decision to speak outside Ireland in a closed academic setting was seen as emblematic of the MBH's disregard for survivors, especially given the Commissioners' refusal to appear before the Oireachtas Committee, the parliamentary body tasked with oversight and accountability for their findings. The Oxford seminar offered a rare insight into the MBH's internal processes and exposed critical methodological flaws. Daly acknowledged that the testimonies of 550 survivors who gave evidence were excluded from the final report, citing legal and evidentiary constraints (Clann, 2021). Her remarks brought into focus the overreliance on institutional records over oral evidence and revealed a prioritisation of bureaucratic and legal standards that dismissed the lived experiences of those racialised while incarcerated (ibid.), evidence of an ontological refusal to confront the structural violence embedded in these institutions. Survivor testimony was dismissed as inherently unreliable, being frequently characterised as anecdotal or contaminated, while documentary evidence—generated by the very institutions accused of the racialised abuse—was treated as objective and definitive.

This dismissal aligns with Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice, where structural and institutional power systematically discredits marginalised voices, denying them credibility within dominant epistemic frameworks (Fricker 2007, 2025, 2017). The rejection of survivor accounts not only perpetuates the racial and patriarchal logics embedded within the institutions but also denies survivors the epistemic recognition necessary for justice. For Black survivors, this constitutes the injustice of their lived experiences of racialisation and harm being simultaneously erased from history and invalidated in the processes designed to redress those harms.

Conclusion

In light of Irish antiblackness detailed throughout this paper, the exclusion of race from Ireland's institutional abuse inquiries does not signal a failure of oversight but suggests a deliberate intentionality to obscure the intersecting oppression of race, along with gender and class, which shaped abuses within the system. Viewed in this light, the reduction of institutional harms to issues of class or societal norms, thus erasing the central role of racialisation in shaping the lives of Black children, is not incidental but a deliberate mechanism of silencing that sustains Irish racial hierarchies and human rights issues. Such epistemic silencing reflects a motivation to maintain Ireland's national imaginary as racially homogeneous by ensuring that racialised narratives remain absent from the collective memory of the nation.

Storrie (2014) argues that collective national memory operates in a 'shadow land of nuance and subtlety,' moulded by present-day social and political imperatives. Such selective historical framing aligns with other patterns of elite-driven memory construction, as theorised by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), where collective national memory is tailored to serve contemporary political needs. By framing institutional abuses as discrete historical episodes divorced from their structural dimensions, the state continues to marginalise Black survivors, who are rendered invisible, their lived experiences excluded from public discourse and state reparatory frameworks (Bryan, 2024). The disproportionate targeting of Black children for vaccine trials, the racialised categorisation that denied them adoption opportunities, and their segregation within institutions amplifies the racialised devaluation of their lives. Without confronting the conjoined epistemic and testimonial injustices that continue to silence Black survivors, the state's mechanisms for redressing human rights abuses will remain fundamentally inadequate.

The implications of this erasure extend beyond collective national memory to Ireland's obligations under international human rights frameworks. Despite its ratification of ICERD in 2000 and its constitutional commitments to equality, the state has failed to align its domestic practices with its international obligations. Although race was eventually included as an analytical category, the MBH report failed to address systemic abuses, especially the racialised exclusion of Black children from adoption and their racialisation within institutions. This erasure perpetuates epistemic injustice, denying the lived realities of

survivors, while enabling the state to evade accountability for its complicity in racialised abuses.

Phil Mullen is Assistant Professor/Coordinator of Black Studies, and Deputy Director of the MPhil in Race and Gender, Trinity College Dublin. Her early career was spent working in the NGO-sector, much of which was with the Irish Traveller Movement. She is a trustee of the Association of Mixed Race Irish (AMRI), member of African Scholars Association of Ireland, and a member of the UN IDPAD steering committee 2015-2024. She is a Ministerial appointee to the National Advisory Committee on the Restitution and Repatriation of Cultural Heritage board. Her research focuses on Africans and people of African descent in Ireland, and the sociohistorical framing of what it means to be Black in 21st century Ireland.

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[i] I am guided by Kwame Anthony Appiah as to capitalising the word 'Black' but using lowercase for 'blackness': ''Black' in upper case signals respect and parity with other racial categories, emphasising the importance of recognising Black people's unique identity and experiences. It acknowledges their distinct history, culture, and struggles. On the other hand, 'blackness' in lowercase suggests a more fluid and less determined concept, allowing for diversity within the Black community, acknowledging individual identities, and emphasising the spectrum of experiences that may not fit a single mold.' Appiah K.A (2020) The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/.

[ii] Two institutions selected by the MBH members based on their size and how long they had been in operation.

[iii] Though the de-privileging of race must remain 'both an important critical theoretical and research objective (Ifekwunigwe 2001, p. 44) I will use both the term 'mixed' (with single quotation marks) and race as they are 'culturally comprehensible' (Azoulay 2003, p. 234) for the current discussion.

[iv] In addition to a number of Black children like me, there was a child who I believe was Hawaiian-Irish, another who was Cypriot-Irish and another of Maltese-Irish descent in the institution in which I was incarcerated during the 1970s.

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[v] For example, though born in a Dublin hospital to a Wicklow mother, I was shipped down an isolated industrial school in Loughrea, Co. Galway within two weeks of my birth.

[vi] This process was not unique to Black children and similar discrimatory processes were applied to racialised as Other, disabled and Traveller children.