

Invasive Waters: Forced Labor, Resistance, and Embodiment in the Magdalene Laundries

For the female inhabitants of Magdalene laundries and industrial schools in Ireland (many of them minors), water was far from refreshing--rather, it produced physical discomfort through its capacity to soak, to physically overwhelm and cover the body. In a 2013 commission aimed at determining the extent of the state's involvement with the Magdalene laundries, several women interviewed reported that being covered in water was one of the worst things about working in the laundries (940). Alongside such reports of exploitation, however, were reports of girls' resistance--of "going on the wren" (sitting on the stairs and refusing to work), and amazingly, of hitting a nun "with a stick from the laundry" (933).

Whether of resistance or oppression, such moments stand out as flashes of stories that punctuate the larger report, evoking a curiously vivid sense of the girls' embodiment. In my paper, I will add to current conversations about child agency by assessing the resistance and creative lives of girls who are usually evoked as a byword of oppression. Cindy Cruz's theory of "resistance in tight spaces" will be helpful for me, because it allows me to show how girls in Magdalene laundries resisted using whatever they had (their bodies, the stairs, laundry sticks, etc.).

However, I will also examine records of the objects they produced-- including account books of clothing sales and laundry accounts, and details of the girls' work routines. I argue that further illuminating the routines that were forced on their bodies allows us to see what constitutes resistance to these routines. I do not want to merely investigate the strategies these girls used to get by, however, but also to recover and dignify their intellectual lives and creativity. To that end, I will also examine depictions of work written by survivors, including memoirs and plays, with particular attention to depictions of creativity and work within the asylums. I posit that forced needlework might have provided not only a respite from the physical invasiveness of water but also a space for creative thought where, though bodies were policed, minds were not.