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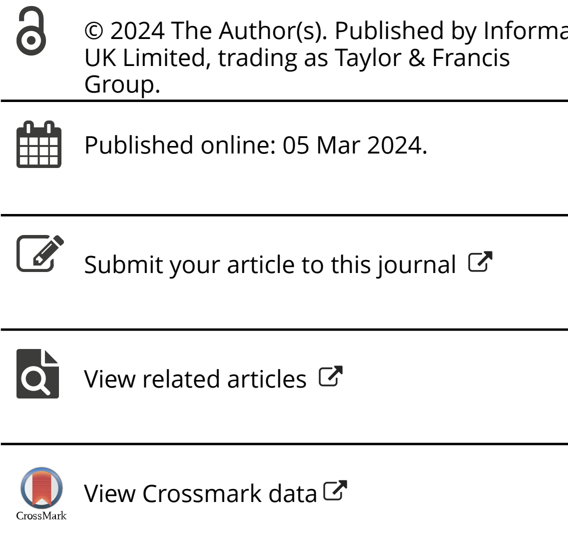

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Redress, memorials and activism: can heritage be activism?

Patricia Lundy

Sociology, Ulster University, Belfast, Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is Ireland. Activism has been crucial in exposing historical institutional abuse in different institutions, organisations and contexts. Inquiries set up to investigate abuse have recommended memorials as an element of redress. This article explores what types of memorialisation survivors regard as appropriate, and why. Two responses are considered: (1) state and (2) 'bottom-up' unofficial. The article highlights that survivors are rarely active participants in co-creating and implementing state responses. The concept of 'authorised heritage discourse' (AHD) is used to shed light on whose knowledge is prioritised, who are deemed the experts and who decides what heritage is. The article contributes to this theorisation by proposing a new concept, 'activist heritage', and examines its potential to create spaces and unlock transformative dynamics that empower survivors. Then, using Justice for Magdalene Research's (JFMR) virtual memorial museum as a case study of 'activist heritage', the article shows that in the absence of state or national forms of recognition, JFMR provides a corrective to AHD. It acts as a counter-narrative in the struggle over memory to state and church 'forgetting', ignoring and minimising institutional abuse. The role, benefits and outcomes for survivors of such 'bottom-up' memorialisation is assessed.

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Introduction: struggles for memory

In Ireland, comprising Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI), systems of institutional confinement were widespread for most of the twentieth century, imposing social control over tens of thousands of vulnerable citizens, many suffering abuse and neglect while in 'care' (O'Donnell, O'Rourke, and Smith 2022, xvii). For decades, survivors experienced shaming, forced secrecy, denial and cover-up. During the 1990s, in response to survivor-led campaigns, the state was forced to set up inquiries to investigate the mounting allegations of clerical child sexual abuse and childhood abuse in residential institutions, as well as abuses perpetrated against women and young girls who were committed to Magdalene laundries[1] and mother and baby institutions. These inquiries reported profound trauma, systemic abuse and state and church failings. Despite multiple inquiries, tension and contestation remain about this period in Ireland's history. The government-funded Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes (2021) (hereafter Commission) is a case in point.

The Commission's final report generated considerable public debate, as serious defects regarding its conclusions, evidence and methodology emerged (Enright 2021). Many survivors did not accept the report's accounts as a true and full reflection of what they told the inquiry. As one source noted,

CONTACT Patricia Lundy p.lundy@ulster.ac.uk Sociology, Ulster University, Belfast Campus, Belfast, BC-07-126, Northern Ireland

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those silenced as young women had their perspectives muted as the result of a 'misconception that written sources, framed in professional language, offer superior insights into this complex history' (QUB Oral History Project, 24). Eight survivors took legal action against the government, angered that the Commission reported that there was little evidence of forced or commercial adoption in Ireland, and little evidence of physical abuse in mother and baby institutions. Activist academic Mairead Enright commented: 'this is the latest in a series of state investigations into so-called "historical" institutional injustice that follow a "bespoke official history"'. Enright, with 24 other academics, published an alternative Executive Summary setting out a damning indictment of the Commission's findings, analysis and processes (Enright and O'Donoghue 2021). Based on the same evidence available to the Commission, they argued that there is ample evidence of breaches of human rights in the mother and baby homes system, including coerced adoption, institutional racism, and inhuman and degrading treatment. This example shows the struggle over memory between the different versions of history of that period and lack of agreement across parties about the acknowledgement and scope of abuses and harms, the legal implications, and how to deal with those legacies. It further demonstrates that the main agents of abuse – the Irish state and especially the Catholic church – continue to minimise their role and responsibility and prevaricate about the abuse.

Heritage, however, can play an important role in remembering. It is a powerful vehicle in narrating national history and identity, a way in which the conflict between truth and justice can be articulated. As shown herein, memory and commemoration are inexorably connected to the heritage process (Lundy and McGovern 2008, 40). However, as the literature asserts, heritage is a highly political process, malleable to the needs of power and often contested (Lundy and McGovern 2008, 37; Smith 2006). This article firstly explores the concept of 'authorised heritage discourse' (AHD) and debates within the field of critical heritage studies (CHS). I contribute to this theorisation by proposing a new concept, 'activist heritage' (AH). This approach challenges what constitutes heritage and advocates a more bottom-up, survivor-led, activist approach than the one normally applied by governments, museums and tourist boards. I do this in the interest of making the term 'heritage' more inclusive, turning it from a top-down, state-friendly, managerialist, formal and tangible concept into one that allows for the experiences of the marginalised to be acknowledged, narrated and memorialised. Some principles are proposed to inform policy and practice. In the second part, drawing on empirical research, I consider what types of memorials survivors deem appropriate, and why. In parts three and four, two types of memorialisation are critically examined – official and unofficial. The Justice for Magdalene Research's (JFMR) virtual memorial museum is used as a case study to explore the role of unofficial 'bottom-up' activism, alongside government responses. The main outcomes, challenges and opportunities of AH are explored.

Critical heritage studies – (re)conceptualising heritage

It could be said that heritage is a loosely and generally poorly defined term that continues to be diluted and incorporated into neo-liberal discourse via professionalisation, commodification and industrialisation. CHS scholars Smith (2006), Harrison (2013) and Robertson (2012) describe heritage as rooted in 'official discourse', 'authorised heritage discourse' (AHD) or 'hegemonic discourse'. Smith's AHD has been particularly influential, presenting a top-down regulatory view of heritage, imposed by elites and dominant hidden power (Smith 2006, 111). There is, Smith argues, a predefined set of criteria that privilege the heritage of elite classes. These are used to measure, value and determine the status of heritage. Thus, in practice, heritage articulates the values and narratives of the powerful. This denotes unequal power relations: who gets to decide what is remembered, excluded or included? This in turn has significant consequences for individuals and particular social groups. Frequently, the marginalised, those whose values and experiences do not fit the dominant narrative, are excluded. CHS scholars have moved thinking away from narrowly defined views of heritage represented by elites (material, monumental and nationally significant) towards the meanings placed on these materials and the social processes inherent in attributing

'value' to them as heritage (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000; Smith 2006). Thus, heritage is not simply a physical 'thing' but also encompasses social processes around the production of knowledge. As Harrison (2013a, 56) notes, heritage became a specialised field, the purview of experts removed from the local, and 'redeployed as a national, state controlled, professionalized practice'. Both Smith and Harrison's critiques of AHD suggest that 'official' heritage discourse and elitism in the heritage profession act as inhibitors to a broader understanding and practice of heritage in society.

While emphasising that official heritage is undeniably political, others point to its inherently dissonant nature (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). They note that heritage is 'the part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary (and future) use' (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000, 17). Smith (2006, 4) emphasises that state-sanctioned heritage is often 'about the promotion of a consensus version of history . . . to regulate cultural and social tensions in the present'. As the literature asserts, dissonance is inherent to heritage; it underlies heritage representation at all levels, and particularly heritage related to difficult knowledge. Byrne (2009, 234) cautions that 'catastrophic events may be "buried"' by the state's control of official history, but this does not mean they cannot be recuperated by local action'. Scholars' theorisations of official heritage are particularly useful in unpacking responses to challenges posed by 'difficult knowledge' and 'dark' history in Ireland concerning institutional abuse. This period witnessed social oppression, silence, secrecy and shaming, particularly regarding female sexuality and reproduction. This sits uneasily with contemporary Ireland's self-image.

Increased attention has recently been paid to intangible forms of heritage and shifts in its dimensions from elite to vernacular (Smith and Akagawa 2009). This includes 'alternative heritage' discourses reflecting more bottom-up, non-elite, plural, fluid, counter-hegemonic and participatory interpretations (Robertson 2008). In reaction to UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage (Smith and Akagawa 2009), this reconceptualisation is not only about *what* form heritage takes, but *who*, *how* and *why*. It redefines, as Harrison (2013, 579) notes, 'the values which heritage is held to represent'. Thus, old notions of a single 'canon' of heritage have been replaced by more 'representative' models, recognising a multitude of different 'heritages' (Harrison 2013a, 580). The experiences, histories and expertise of ordinary and everyday places become an important part of what is understood and conceptualised as heritage and thus worthy of protection. Heritage from below, Robertson suggests, 'is both a means to and manifestation of counter hegemonic practices' and potentially a 'force for democratisation and progenitor of social change'. To engage with a sense of heritage from below is to seek to push the heritage meaning debate further along, to include voices often hidden from history. Intangible heritage discourse has moved thinking away from the narrowly defined hegemonic elite version – tangible, such as monuments, commemorative sites and memory museums – to heritage that may involve more performative or ephemeral gestures of recognition and atonement, such as public apologies, annual ceremonies and rituals or performances; or 'everyday heritage' (Bonnin and Moore-Cherry 2023). These alternative approaches seek to realise heritage 'as a process understood, practiced, and experienced on-the-ground by the people themselves' (Muzaini and Minca 2018, 1).

Recent research has focused on how visitors engage with heritage sites and museum spaces to provide important insights into emotions and affect (Smith 2021; Smith and Campbell 2015). Smith's (2021, 306) extensive empirical research highlights that visitors are 'partners or cocreators in the wider historical and contemporary meanings such sites have'. People are impacted by their visits in a range of ways and intensities, and emotions and affect play a key part in their experiences and what ***they do*** with heritage. This plays out in ways not necessarily envisaged by curators of such sites or spaces. The idea of 'registers of engagement' (Smith and Campbell 2015) acknowledges the agency of individuals in creating their own meanings and understandings of exhibitions and heritage sites. As Smith (2021, 269) points out, visitors mediate the meaning of their visits in the context of a range of social and cultural issues, but also 'continuing experiences of injustice and inequity' and struggles for recognition. Heritage-making has consequences. However, the elephant

in the room of heritage and museum studies, she argues, is the lack of recognition, of affect and emotion as essential constitutive elements of heritage-making (Smith and Campbell 2015). Thus affect, emotion, power and politics should be central concepts in critical heritage studies.

'Activist heritage': a participatory-survivor-led approach

Seeking to contribute to the theorisation of heritage, I propose a new concept: 'activist heritage' (AH). I contend that it has the potential to create spaces and unlock transformative dynamics that empower survivors, generate a sense of ownership and create pathways to justice and social change. A clear definition of AH is required to assist further study and comparative research; this is work in progress.[2] Memory studies and the concept of memory activism/activists have been helpful in unpacking the concept of AH (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2021.Gutman and Wüstenberg (2021) have developed a complex typology of memory activism, and this alerts us to roles, modes of interaction and notions of temporality. Building on this work, I suggest AH can be individuals, a single group or collaborating groups. It involves non-state actors whose goals, strategy and public stance are to work towards generating change and/or transformation in dominant memory narratives, and to inform practice. AH seeks to challenge knowledge production – whose voices are heard? Who are the experts? Whose knowledge is valued? What distinguishes it from participatory/collaborative heritage work is this: AH is not neutral. It is unapologetically political in orientation and puts heritage in the service of struggles for social justice and transformative politics. However, some individuals and/or groups may not see themselves and their work as activism. Others may feel uncomfortable or uneasy about identifying as an activist due to cultural, political or institutional pressures, risks and/or constraints.

AH is also distinctive in how it is carried out. It is participatory, collaborative, egalitarian, emancipatory, activist in orientation and in solidarity with struggles pursuing justice and social transformation. Its processes and practices facilitate agency and empowerment. In practice, this means that heritage would be collaborative, putting survivors and their justice needs centre-stage, and challenging notions of 'who the experts are' and whose knowledge matters. It is a change-oriented approach, with survivors determining their justice needs, concerns and course of action because they have the lived experience. AH is itself intended to form part of a wider emancipatory project by challenging the way in which knowledge is constituted, validated and determined useful (Lundy 2022) – challenging the traditional notion of whose knowledge matters and what/who it is for. This would be a counterweight to the elitism and hierarchy that pervades conventional forms of knowledge production, typified in AHD.

Participation is fundamental to AH. The importance of survivor participation is increasingly recognised internationally and underscored in policy. However, research shows that survivor participation is often 'superficial', and survivors are at best consultees and rarely in decision-making roles (Hamber and Lundy 2020; Lundy 2020). Participation, as practised by activists, seeks to promote egalitarianism. Adhering to AH principles means that memorialisation would be survivor-led. Survivors would participate in each stage of the memorialisation process – the initiation, co-design, development of strategy and putting of strategy into action – with full participation in decision-making and continual evaluation. There are many benefits to participation including empowerment, agency and decreased marginalisation. Participation can make survivors feel valued and dignified, generating meaning, personal transformation and recognition (Hamber and Lundy 2020; Lundy 2022). Participation is as much about *the process* as the outcome, and if carried out rigorously, is potentially emancipatory and transformative (Lundy 2022). I argue that AH offers an alternative pathway to framing heritage – one that puts addressing survivors' needs centre-stage and drives approaches and processes. Commentators, however, have cautioned against over-eulogising memory from below, as it too can be rife with politics, agendas, hierarchies, power-relations, exclusions, contestation and visions of the future (Crooke 2010; Lundy and McGovern 2008).

Mindful of these considerations, the theorisation of heritage through AHD critiques, alongside intangible heritage discourses, AH is crucial to understanding responses to institutional abuse. The first task, though, is to determine what survivors want, what they determine appropriate, and why.

Memorialisation: what do survivors want?

Memorialisation is often a demand of survivors and society in recognition of past crimes. Here, I draw on workshops (Lundy 2016) with survivors of historical institutional abuse (HIA) in NI. I carried out five workshops in 2015, held in Belfast and Derry, involving 75 survivors. I am an activist academic and my research is explicitly underpinned by a commitment to activist research (Hale 2008; Lundy 2022) and participatory action research methodology (Hamber and Lundy 2020; Lundy and McGovern 2008). This means I work collaboratively with survivors of historical institutional child abuse in a partnership of equals, and survivors' justice needs are centre-stage. In line with this approach, the workshops' objective was to ensure survivors' voices were heard and their views foregrounded in debates on redress policy. All aspects of the workshops were designed with survivor groups and in collaboration with the survivor-led Panel of Experts on Redress.[3] This included choice of venues, format, questions, consent and future outputs. This information was again explained to participants in the workshops, ensuring consent was informed. Notes were taken, and discussions were recorded and later transcribed, with the permission of participants. A draft report detailing the workshop findings – *What Survivors Want from Redress* (Lundy 2016) – was shared with survivor groups and the Panel of Experts for comment and consent before publication. My research has been used to co-create campaigning 'tools' that have been utilised by survivors in their struggle to achieve redress that meets their justice needs (Lundy 2016, 2020, 2022). I also draw on data from the Listening Exercise – part of 'Dublin Honours Magdalenes'. The organisers of this event implemented a rigorous and transparent ethical approach (O'Donnell and McGettrick 2020, 7–8).[4] Together, these sources provide first-hand accounts and insights into survivors' views on memorialisation, what type of memorials they consider appropriate, and why. A survivor perspective is frequently absent from policy debates on memorialisation.

Survivors of Irish institutional abuse come from counties across the island of Ireland; some moved to the UK and beyond, and others were transported to Australia as children. Survivors are not homogeneous; they are individuals with various responses to abusive experiences and diverse needs and views (Lundy 2016). That said, recurring themes and some consensus on the specific issue of memorialisation could be identified. In workshops, survivors were asked about their views on memorialisation, and the types of memorialisation and collective remembrance they considered appropriate. Opinions differed. Some welcomed memorialisation as a form of acknowledgement and remembrance, others strongly opposed it. Memorialisation for some could contribute to personal healing. Others questioned this and were particularly opposed to a physical monument, perceiving it as a depressing reminder about something they wished to forget. As one survivor said: 'I would never want to go to a monument, it would bring me down' (Lundy 2016, 27). Survivors expressed concern that a monument could be forgotten in a few years; also, where would it be located? As the workshop discussion progressed, participants began to link a memorial to acknowledgement, recognition, public awareness, education and preventing repetition of abuse. Ideas were posited that a memorial could be a space created for reflection – a reminder of this part of NI's history. Others felt that an appropriate memorial would be 'a stained-glass window in the Guild Hall or City Hall; a window would always be there. … it would remind, educate … ' Another suggested 'the Vietnam [memorial] … in America, the wall. I think it's just amazing and all the names who died. I'm not saying put all our names up, but [it's] something that people can go and look at' (Lundy 2016, 26). Survivors also understood memorialisation in the context of acceptance of responsibility and accountability by engaging with the role of church and state in HIA. As one survivor put it, 'we don't need memorials; what we need is for people to understand'. Another noted:

> the institutions have to be permanently reminded. This society has to be permanently reminded of its failings ... there are children who will ask the question, 'What's that about?' And somebody will have to say, 'This is a legacy that the state failed' (Lundy 2016, 26–27).

Underscoring the view that the role of memorialisation was to ensure non-repetition, another survivor commented:

> I think that there has to be something where the people who are responsible for the situation will be and once they look at it, it will remind them of what their institution has done – that they will never be able to forget or never be able to do it again on others (Lundy 2016, 26).

The importance of education emerged as a theme. This led to discussion about raising awareness in schools and creating dialogue. It was said that this could be done with an advocacy book including survivors' anonymised stories. This was seen as a protective measure and reminder of the power of state and church and the principle 'never again'. Such projects would serve to remind, educate and validate their experiences of abuse, covered up for decades. Another proposal was that an International Rights of the Child Prize, similar in status to the Nobel Peace Prize, could be awarded to those who make a significant contribution to the rights of children. It was suggested that this could be in the form of an educational bursary for their children and grandchildren to support access to education and university. Hence, we can see that survivors felt that memorials also serve a need for wider society and potentially for future generations.

Further ideas emerged about establishing a living memorial or research centre. This would include an archive of survivors' stories – the opportunity to 'tell their story' in their own way. It was said that this would provide a narrative of their experiences, while also informing future generations of a coercive, controlling and discriminatory past. The following comments were made by survivors: 'An opportunity to tell who we are'. 'A future record; that would be a good idea'.

> [If anonymised] I don't care who actually reads what happened to me or to anybody else in those institutions ... This society literally closed the gates on us, pulled a blanket over, and said 'That's got nothing to do with us'. Closed their eyes ... and the only people who got beyond that veil were unfortunately people who knew how to work a system and that would give them access to some of the most vulnerable people in this society and that's fucking unforgiveable (Lundy 2016, 27).

A truth-telling archive housing primary documentary evidence retrieved from survivors, institutions and other sources, alongside survivors' personal accounts, validates the written and spoken accounts of those silenced, marginalised, condemned and treated with indifference. Many of the views expressed above resonate with intangible forms of heritage (Smith and Akagawa 2009).

Turning to the ROI, the Listening Exercise was part of a Dublin-held event on 5–6 June 2018: 'Dublin Honours Magdalenes' (O'Donnell and McGettrick 2020). Participants were asked: how should we remember what happened in the Magdalene laundries? The women insisted that what happened to them should never be forgotten. 'It should be under social history ... It should be compulsory ... I'd like them to read the whole history of the Magdalene Laundries' (O'Donnell and McGettrick 2020, 34). Like survivors in NI, participants felt that there should be a scholarship: 'the Magdalene scholarship. For the grandchildren'. A key issue that arose was honouring those who had died in the laundries and are buried in mass graves. The women talked about attending Flowers for Magdalenes events organised by JFMR (discussed below). As one survivor remarked: 'look at all the people that died and were never honoured ... Honour the people that worked there'. Another commented that

> there should be something in each county ... to represent the women, maybe in a graveyard, a plaque or a Celtic cross to say, 'to honour these women who were incarcerated and died and perished in the Magdalene Laundries'... in each cemetery, maybe, where there was a Magdalene Laundry (O'Donnell and McGettrick 2020, 38).

Some survivors discussed other forms of remembrance: 'a day that's called "Magdalene Day" ... [a] commemorative day'. As one survivor said, 'I want a place for the healing. And this event has

brought healing to all of us' (O'Donnell and McGettrick 2020, 43). Here, we can see the importance of commemoration and a place, space or ceremony dedicated to honouring those who died in laundries. These deaths and the circumstances have been airbrushed out of national discourse and consciousness.

Conversation then turned to a memorial or monument. 'All the names should [be] put on [a memorial] . . . I think school children . . . should be brought to the monument' (O'Donnell and McGettrick 2020, 36). Linking a memorial to atonement and remembrance, here is what one survivor said:

> I think the money should be spent on a plaque . . . 'Mea culpa' – Somewhere in Dublin, because Dublin is the capital. Just a plaque with 'Mea culpa, mea culpa', and a few words to say, 'We will forever make sure that this never happens again'.

Others favoured a physical statue: 'definitely there should be a big statue in Dublin. That should be the main one. And when people pass by, they'll read it and they'll think . . . Through the future generations, it will help them remember' (O'Donnell and McGettrick 2020, 40–43). Another made the point that there should be

> a statue of a woman in O'Connell Street . . . with all the other statues to everyone. And especially for all the women who died within the convents and for those who've died since. It would mean a lot I think to every Magdalene survivor (O'Donnell and McGettrick 2020, 41).

This quote is interesting because it highlights the fact that Irish authorised heritage has honoured male historical and political figures, and the 'ordinary', marginalised and powerless females are absent. The importance of memorialisation beyond the capital city (Dublin) was raised:

> right around the country. If there was something put up in every town, where it was. Every town. Because you couldn't exclude any one town. They all went through it, you know. So something, no matter how small it is, it means something. It's only a plaque, a statue or whatever . . . something to remember. And when people pass by, they'll read it and they'll think (O'Donnell and McGettrick 2020, 43).

Others disagreed: 'what good is a statue?'

Finally, there was discussion about transitioning Magdalene laundries to a site of conscience (O'Donnell and McGettrick 2020, 44–46). There were differences in opinion on this. Some survivors want the sites demolished; others suggested a museum. Here are some of their views: 'Burn it down'. '[Burning it down] still wouldn't take away your memories, though, would it?' Further views were expressed about the purpose of a site of conscience, as the following quotes indicate: 'And if they're going to . . . make something out of [Seán MacDermott Street], a safe home for women and children, and especially young pregnant girls. Girls like me who ran away from home, somewhere safe to go'. Another said that she would like the building to be used as a charity. 'A place where the people could stay – a retiring home, or some place they could go on holidays, or . . . for healing'. Others believed that Magdalene laundries had an educational role as a site of conscience:

> what hardship we all went through. And that's why I think one of them should be left standing as a laundry, as an institution, and this institution, like Kilmainham Gaol. People go into Kilmainham Gaol because they know the history of it. The same way with the laundry.

Some survivors wanted the truth to be told – to set the record straight:

> People out there think when they hear of High Park or where they hear laundries, that we were all prostitutes . . . We are not all prostitutes . . . And people just assumed because . . . Mary Magdalene, because that name was there, they thought we were prostitutes from the streets. And it's so awful. It's a label that we've carried all them years (O'Donnell and McGettrick 2020, 24).

The above discussion provides insights into what survivors considered appropriate as heritage, their needs, and concerns, and what they understand as the role and utility of heritage. It shows the diversity of survivors' needs. The next section assesses state responses and considers to what extent these views and needs have been heard and acted upon.

Official state responses

As discussed at the start of this article, there have been considerable criticisms about state responses to institutional abuses across the island of Ireland including: conclusions, defects and the methodology of abuse commissions and inquiries (Enright 2021; Enright and O'Donoghue 2021,); denial of rights (O'Donnell, O'Rourke, and Smith 2022); re-traumatisation and re-victimisation of survivors (Lundy 2020); and redress recommendations that fall short in meeting survivors' justice needs (Lundy 2022). Memorialisation forms part of state symbolic redress to survivors. It should therefore be viewed as an expression of recognition, justice and accountability, part of the state's formal acknowledgement of its failure to prevent abuse and/or a direct cause of that abuse. Therefore, states and other stakeholders have memorialisation responsibilities. Memorials were recommended by the main HIA inquiries in Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI) stated that 'physical structures such as sculptures or plaques are valued as visible reminders of past events or individuals whose memory should be commemorated'. The report stated that while there were differing views expressed by survivors,

> we are of the opinion that a memorial should be erected to remind legislators and others of what many children experienced in residential homes. We recommend that a suitable physical memorial should be erected in Parliament Buildings, or in the grounds of the Stormont Estate (Hart, Lane and Doherty 2017, para 12, 230–231).

This falls within Smith's (2006) concept of AHD, where powerful agencies make assumptions about what heritage is and how it should be understood. The NI government, based at Stormont, failed to prevent abuse and/or was a direct cause of it. Thus, for some survivors, Stormont may hold what Meskell (2002, 558) calls a 'negative heritage' value, referring to a 'conflictual site that becomes the repository of negative memory in the collective imaginary'. Moreover, how people view heritage is often bound up in a sense of place.

Seven years after the HIA report, officials from the Executive Office (TEO) proposed a public bench in Stormont and/or a bench in each of the 11 local authority areas in NI,[5] with talk of a phased approach. Officials suggested perhaps utilising QR code technology, linking to information on HIA-related matters. Not everyone has a smart phone, or the technological literacy to use it. One survivor group withdrew from the process, arguing that a bench will not 'tell the story' of institutional abuse. It would be conspicuously inconspicuous. If we consider the purpose of memorialisation, and survivors' views as discussed above, TEO's proposal falls short in meeting survivors' needs. It would do little to prompt public dialogue or raise awareness about the past and effectively obfuscates state/church culpability. There is clearly tension here between what survivors want – a 'living' heritage and memorial potentially acting as a dialogic tool for future generations – versus a bench. To date, government has not adequately engaged with survivors, including those who are not part of advocacy groups and those who live outside NI. Survivors' views that are already in the public domain have not been considered (Lundy 2016). This top-down approach undervalues survivor agency – their participation is perceived as a complication. Alongside the single physical memorial recommended by the HIA Inquiry, a co-designed memorial programme to reflect the diversity of survivor views should be progressed. This is more likely to generate greater ownership and participation in the memorial process. Taking forward memorialisation must be informed at all stages by the views of survivors.

Turning to ROI, in March 2022 (almost 15 years after the first abuse inquiry report), the Irish government announced proposals for a National Centre for Research and Remembrance on the site of a former Magdalene laundry in McDermott Street, Dublin. The proposals state that the centre will stand as a site of conscience to *honour equally all* (emphasis added) who were resident in industrial schools, Magdalene laundries, mother and baby institutions, reformatories, and related institutions. Although physically in Dublin, national centre content will be accessible throughout Ireland and abroad via the provision of digital access to some records and exhibits. The centre will

comprise: a museum and exhibition space, a research centre and repository of records related to institutional trauma in the twentieth century, and a garden space for reflection and remembrance. Social housing units, educational, family and parenting supports will also be constructed (Government of Ireland 2023). The proposals reflect those made by JFMR in collaboration with the Open Heart City (OCH) [6] project, which campaigned for a site of conscience. In July 2023, the state proposal for McDermott Street was opened to public consultation.

Concerns, however, have been raised: the consultation was not widely published; there was no public awareness campaign; turnaround time was short (July – September); many survivors did not know the consultation was taking place; some activists remain opposed to a single commemorative site to *all* historical abuse in different institutions, organisations and contexts. Crucially, survivors are not involved in co-designing the site, despite contrary commitments by the Taoiseach (prime minister).[7] The government established a steering group to 'design' the national centre, and to give it 'strategic direction' and 'overall vision'.[8] The group does not include survivors. A Freedom of Information response reveals the steering group comprises senior government officials, state architect, National Archives, National Museum of Ireland, Dublin City Council, Department of Tourism, and various other government departments. The membership of the group reflects elites tasked with the authorised heritage discourse. Survivors' concerns have been reported in the media: 'we would be opposed to any State memorial or commemoration without our full and informed consent. We would ask that the State defer developing any such monstrosity that they are planning for Sean McDermott Street' (Kelly 2022). More scathing comments have been made, as the following quote reveals:[9]

> it is a state proposed horror show and circus to the most depraved. Concentrating the conflicting issues is a barbaric act of trauma in itself . . . It is a horrendous proposal of dumping it all to save money in a mass grave where money was the currency underpinning such abuse permitted to prosper in a state that never thinks respectfully but parsimoniously . . . Will the site become a mass grave for all the sins of the Irish State?

The literature asserts that heritage is a highly political process, deferential to the needs of the state and inherently dissonant (Smith 2006). As shown earlier, there is struggle over memory between the different versions of history of this period. The main agents of abuse – the Irish state and especially the Catholic church – continue to minimise their role and responsibility and prevaricate about the abuse. If the proposed Magdalene site of conscience is to have integrity, it should document and acknowledge church/state culpability and the state's failure to protect the most vulnerable. Like official apologies, memorials as an element of symbolic redress are meaningless without acceptance of responsibility, accountability and justice.

The proposals for a national centre are recent, and it remains to be seen what shape the national centre will take. However, what we can tell from the above analysis of official responses is that survivors' needs are not driving memorialisation. This top-down approach risks undervaluing survivors' agency and expertise or, worse, treating their perspective as an inconvenience rather than central to the redress process. If we apply 'activist heritage' principles, such heritage work could empower and encourage survivors' agency, generate a sense of ownership and create pathways to justice and social change. If, however, survivors are not in decision-making roles, do not participate as equals in the design, implementation and monitoring of memorialisation, it may further marginalise and disempower. Thus, heritage can itself act as a form of disempowerment. State projects with insufficient survivor involvement may well be resented by the very people they supposedly claim to honour. This raises pivotal questions about the value of memorials to the survivor on the one hand, and the state and other powerful institutions on the other. Official memorialisation could function to shield state institutions, deflect further scrutiny, placate and silence survivors. In this context, historical injustice may be intensified rather than rectified by glossing over past wrongs and re-traumatising survivors. Smith (2006, 4), however, reminds us that heritage is also used as a resource for subaltern groups to contest and redefine received values and identities.

Unofficial 'bottom-up' memorialisation: putting memory into action

In the absence of state or national forms of recognition, survivors, advocacy groups, in collaboration with academics, and others have found ways to preserve their memories, commemorate and express their voice. I consider one example of what Crooke and McDowell (2022) and Walden (2022) define as 'digital memorial museums', the JFMR project – an exemplar of 'activist heritage'.[10]

In Ireland, one of the most prominent digital memorials is Justice for Magdalenes Research (JFMR). Formerly Justice for Magdalenes (JFM), it was established in 2003 by a group of adoption rights activists, activist academics and lawyers. The group wanted: (1) to secure an official apology from the Irish state; and (2) to establish a compensation scheme for all Magdalene survivors. JFM exited the political arena in May 2013 having achieved its aims of a state apology and the commission to establish a state redress scheme. At this point, JFMR was established. Its main aim is to advance public education by researching the Magdalene laundries and similar institutions and provide information and support to the women who spent time there and their families. It has focused on the role of state involvement in the Magdalene institutions and the human rights abuses that occurred, to make the public aware of how to hold the state accountable. Its website provides a history and sets out the reality of these spaces, who was sent there and why, the conditions, and what state institutions were aware of. Its website acts as a repository for a wide range of material drawing upon collaborative links with other related memory activist projects. This includes the Clann: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the Data ('Clann') – a joint initiative between Adoption Rights Alliance (ARA) and JFMR. Clann's purpose is to help establish what happened to unmarried mothers and their children in twentieth-century Ireland. The Clann project is led by activist academics Maeve O'Rourke and Claire McGettrick, who have developed its policies and procedures in cooperation with global law firm Hogan Lovells since 2015. The JFMR website material includes the Magdalene Oral History Project, which records and archives interviews with survivors, their families, and key informants.

The interviews are available in transcript form, audio files and written submissions. The 84 transcripts from 97 interviewees are widely available through UCD Archives and Irish Qualitative Data Archive and JFMR's website. The project's overall objective is to contribute towards a better understanding of the Magdalene laundry system through the gathering and study of testimonies from people directly or indirectly involved. JFMR is currently developing its virtual museum as an educational tool. The website further includes the Magdalene Names Project, dedicated to painstakingly recording the names of those who died in the laundries and to ensure a proper headstone marking the burial ground of every single woman. The Flowers for Magdalenes is an event to commemorate and honour at least 1,663 former Magdalene women in cemeteries in Ireland, many in unmarked graves. The annual event involves the laying of flowers at Magdalene graves; photographs, videos and other materials from each year are made available on JFMR's website. Since 2016, all cities and towns with a former Magdalene laundry have come together to visit Magdalene graves and lay a flower to honour the women who lived and died therein.

Further links bring the viewer to the memorialisation campaign for the preservation of Magdalene history, and details of the transition to sites of conscience project, in collaboration with Open Heart City Project, there are also links to educational resources, JFMR submissions to the United Nations, and much more.

In 2021, five members of JFMR authored the book *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries: A Campaign for Justice*. It responds to an appeal made by survivors from across Ireland, the UK, US and Australia who took part in the Listening Exercise, who urged that we 'listen to them' and 'hear what happened to them' to ensure it 'never be forgotten' (McGettrick et al. 2021, 1). Survivors wanted the public to know and learn from the abuses they experienced. The book documents how the Irish state and church continue to evade their responsibilities to Magdalene survivors, their failure to provide a truthful account of the abuses in these institutions, and the resistance to the demand that these women be recognised as victims of human rights abuses. It states that in line with JFMR's goal to

challenge knowledge suppression, their source materials are archived and available on their website. JFMR is underpinned by a commitment to political activism and for law reform and political change. JFMR's virtual digital museum is activist heritage in action and a corrective to AHD.

What we can draw from the above discussion is that unofficial 'bottom-up' AH has important benefits or outcomes for participants. Using online media, JFMR provides a means to hold state and church to account, and a platform for survivors 'to tell their stories'. Its open access policy for archive sources makes public previously private, hidden and/or silenced histories; its interconnected activities provide a way for collective commemoration, solidarity and agency. It puts survivors' needs centre-stage and enables survivors to drive memorialisation – its motto is 'nothing about us, without us'. The JFMR memorial site counters the 'epistemic injustice' that, to date, has defined the Irish state's response to survivors who worked, and in some cases died, in Magdalene laundries (McGettrick et al. 2021, 2). What this refers to is the state's unfair treatment of survivors with respect to what counts as knowledge, whose understanding is considered credible, and who gets to participate in establishing facts and deciding what is important to know. This is in line with AH analysis that heritage encompasses social processes around the production of knowledge. JFMR is unapologetically political; members define themselves as activist. Their raison d'être is to challenge official history (AHD), state/church denials and unfounded justifications that continue to carry weight in Irish public discourse. JFMR seeks to ensure that people do not forget, but also to expose histories previously excluded from the national canon. In doing so, it amplifies and generates momentum for its campaign, for solidarity and for people to act and initiate social change. JFMR members are memory activists: 'Individual or group agents who strategically commemorate the past in order to publicly address the dominant perception of it' (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2021). The concept of memory activists is essential for a comprehensive understanding of how memory 'from below' can contribute to political transformation and positive social change (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2021). It has been suggested that digital remembrance offers 'a new form of memory activism that goes beyond territory, allowing for a more rapid spread and greater connectivity' (Crooke and McDowell 2022, 459).

While unofficial memorialisation unquestionably has strengths, these may lack acknowledgement. Hackett and Rolston (2009, 370) suggest that 'bottom-up' memory work can 'facilitate a real sense of empowerment for the individual storyteller, most notably when the story is an expression of agency not just of the individual but also of the collective seeking justice'. However, official/state memorialisation 'bring[s] a gravitas to the story that is not otherwise available, because the whole weight of the official body and possibly the state behind it confirms the validity of the story' (Hackett and Rolston, 2009, 371). Such gravitas is less likely in unofficial memorialisation expressions where the message can be ignored or dismissed by those outside the immediate circle of support and empathy. Therefore, there are hurdles to having 'bottom-up' memorialisation recognised as a form of heritage. That said, as the JFMR example shows, unofficial processes led by those with lived experience of injustice, assisted by activist academics, can provide a counter-narrative, create pathways to social justice and have transformative potential. These alternative narratives are a corrective, juxtaposed to and challenging the AHD. For heritage to be more inclusive and progressive, these correctives should be championed.

Conclusion

This article has offered important insights into survivors' views on memorialisation, what type of memorials they considered appropriate and what they understand as the role and utility of heritage. Such a perspective is frequently absent from heritage policy and practice. Survivors identified a diversity of needs, including the importance of having voice, acknowledgement, validation, accountability, acceptance-of-responsibility, establishing an authoritative historical record/archive, creating awareness, dialogue and educating future generations. This diversity is not being met by authorised heritage. This was evident in state responses to memorialisation. The article shows that

power remains out of the hands of survivors, those traditionally marginalised and silenced. Survivors are not active participants in co-designing and implementing memorialisation; they are not in decision-making roles and their needs are not driving the process. Thus, heritage can itself act as a form of disempowerment and could generate resentment and opposition from the very people it claims to honour. This raises crucial questions about the purpose and value of memorials to survivors on the one hand, and the state and other powerful institutions on the other. I argue that in the struggle over memory, heritage could function to gloss over past wrongs, deter further scrutiny and placate survivors.

In this article, with a view to rectifying this power imbalance, I propose a new framework and concept: 'activist heritage'. Underpinning principles were suggested. AH is distinctive in both the way it is carried out and the goals it seeks to achieve. It is participatory, collaborative, egalitarian, emancipatory, activist in orientation and in solidarity with struggles pursuing justice and social transformation. Its processes and practices facilitate agency and empowerment. It is a survivor-led approach. A case study of the JFMR virtual memorial museum was presented as a model of AH and showed how this 'bottom-up' approach provided a vehicle, platform and space for survivors and advocates to document past experiences and connect and collectively commemorate. It further showed how JFMR acts as a counter-narrative, in the struggle over memory, to state and church 'forgetting' and minimising institutional abuse. It is a corrective to AHD, by challenging notions about *what* constitutes memorialisation, *who* decides and *how* it is done. Its alternative and diverse forms of heritage – Flowers for Magdalenes Day, names project and oral history testimonies – oppose the narrowly defined hegemonic elite version. It represents a multiplicity of voices and experiences. This alternative heritage approach was initiated, co-designed, performed and experienced by survivors themselves from the 'bottom up'. With its motto being 'nothing about us, without us', JFMR exemplifies 'activist heritage' in action.

After decades of institutional abuse in Ireland, and beyond, a transformation and re-conceptualisation of heritage from the bottom up is required. AH provides an alternative pathway to framing heritage that puts survivors and their justice needs centre-stage. It challenges notions of who the experts are and whose knowledge matters. If implemented rigorously, AH could create spaces and unlock transformative dynamics that empower survivors, generate a sense of ownership and create pathways to justice and social change. AH raises important questions about the processes and practices of memory work. I have argued that the principles that underpin AH should inform official heritage policy and practice. Therein lies the challenge for activists.

Notes

1. Between 1922 and 1996, over 10,000 girls and women were imprisoned in Magdalene laundries in Ireland, forced to carry out unpaid labour and subjected to severe psychological and physical maltreatment. The last Magdalene laundry ceased operating in October 1996.
2. A publication is in preparation drawing on a symposium in Ulster University January 2024: *Critical Heritage, Activism, and Social Change*. The report will explore AH and the underpinning principles.
3. The Panel of Experts comprised survivor-groups, human-rights organisations, legal professionals, and national/international academics. The author was chair.
4. The Listening Exercise was part of a Dublin-held event on 5–6 June 2018; it consisted of round-table discussions with 147 participants, mediated by 26 volunteer facilitators assisted by scribes.
5. Meeting with author, survivor-group Rosetta Trust, and TEO senior civil servants (14 August 2023). Notes on file with the author.
6. http://openheartcitydublin.ie/ 4
7. In October 2020, the Taoiseach announced the Irish government's commitment to establish a national archive related to institutional trauma, designed in cooperation with survivors/advocates (cited in Mahon, O'Rourke, and Scraton 2021, 123).
8. FOI Response, Steering Group for the National Centre for Research and Remembrance, Memorialisation and Historical Burials Unit, 4 August 2023; copy on file.
9. Email from survivor to National Centre for Research and Remembrance – author copied in, Wednesday, 26 July 2023, copy on file.

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Notes on contributor

Patricia Lundy is Professor of Sociology at Ulster University. Her research has focused on dealing with the legacy of the NI conflict, 'truth' recovery, politics of memory, and historical instructional abuse. She has researched both community-based 'truth' recovery processes, police-led historical conflict-related investigations, redress, and institutional abuse inquiries. Her work has been published in a wide range of peer-reviewed academic journals; she is recipient of a Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship and British Academy Senior Research Fellowship.

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