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17

How the Irish became black

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In a well-known scene from the 1991 film *The Commitments*, based on Roddy Doyle's 1987 novel of the same name, several members of the eponymous soul band express their doubts that a group of working-class teenagers from north Dublin will be able to play music written and performed by African-Americans. Their manager, Jimmy Rabbitte, responds by informing them that 'the Irish are the blacks of Europe. And Dubliners are the blacks of Ireland. And the Northside Dubliners are the blacks of Dublin.' Having reassured his friends of their ability to replicate the performance styles of black musicians such as James Brown, Rabbitte concludes his exhortation by citing one of Brown's most famous lyrics: 'So say it once. Say it loud. I'm black and I'm proud.'[1] In Doyle's novel, the dialogue in this scene is both cruder and more incisive. Rabbitte refers to himself, his friends, and their fellow inhabitants of North Dublin's Barrytown community not as 'blacks' but as 'niggers' within the context of Europe, Ireland and Dublin, and he claims that they are disadvantaged because 'the culchies [residents of the city's affluent suburbs] have fuckin' everythin''. When he posts an advertisement for additional musicians in a local magazine, he mandates that 'rednecks and southsiders need not apply'.[2]

This dialogue rings both true and false. It is plausible to argue that in the mid-to-late 1980s Ireland was indeed an economically marginal nation in comparison with much of western Europe; in 1986 its unemployment rate was 17 per cent, many of the jobless had been out of work for over six months and net emigration offset the birth rate.[3] Dublin, the capital and the largest city, had the country's highest unemployment rate; it was a declining industrial city with an undereducated labour force. While the north side of Dublin had been an aristocratic neighbourhood throughout the Georgian era, by the end of the nineteenth century most of its mansions had become dilapidated, overcrowded tenements, and when twentieth-century reformers agitated for improved accommodation for the city's poor, the latter were decanted into council housing in newly created northern exurbs such as the fictional Barrytown, communities of which Jimmy Rabbitte's despised 'southsiders' and 'culchies' were either disdainful or oblivious.[4]

While Rabbitte and his friends had reason to feel marginalised within their city, their country and the European Community, which Ireland had joined in 1973, his comparison of their challenges to those faced by past and present African-Americans is unlikely to have resonated among Irish people or those of Irish heritage in the United States.[5] In the 2016 census, only 1.3 per cent of the Republic's inhabitants identified themselves as 'black', and this percentage would have been lower in the years of economic depression prior to the rise of the 'Celtic Tiger' in the mid-1990s, which saw an influx of migrants, including some of African descent. At the time at which the members of the Commitments would have grown up, the best-known individual of black heritage in Ireland, with the possible exception of the mixed-race Manchester United football player Paul McGrath, was probably the musician Phil Lynott, the lead singer and songwriter of the successful rock band Thin Lizzy. Lynott's father was a man of colour from Guyana, but Lynott was raised in Dublin by his white mother's parents, attended a local Catholic school, and drew inspiration for his lyrics from Celtic folklore and Irish history, rather than from the cultures of the African diaspora – Thin Lizzy's first hit was a version of the well-known Irish folk song 'Whiskey in the jar'. But if Irish people of the 1980s are not likely to have felt much kinship with African-Americans, the same was true of Irish-Americans, despite their having considerably more experience of black people and black cultures. As the radical historian and self-identified 'race traitor' Noel Ignatiev argued in his seminal 1995 work *How the Irish Became White*, from the early nineteenth century onwards Irish migrants to the United States soon recognised that the nation's social hierarchy was based upon race much more than it was on class, ethnicity or religion, and that for them and their descendants to climb the ladder it was essential that they did all they could to distinguish themselves from people of colour.[6] Although Irish-Americans of the *Commitments* era were aware of their immigrant ancestors' struggles against poverty and religious and ethnic prejudice, they considered their historical experiences in the United States to be most comparable to those of other white ethnic groups, such as Poles and Italians, rather than to those of black Americans. Robert Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign drew much of its support from African-Americans, but throughout the previous century and a half politicians who were Irish-American, or who hoped to appeal to Irish-American voters, ranged from apathetic to openly hostile towards black Americans and their concerns. In the late twentieth century, Americans of Irish descent might recall with anger the 'No Irish need apply' signs that had supposedly barred their ancestors from jobs and housing, but few would have interpreted this expression of ethnic prejudice as comparable to the complete racial segregation of public facilities in the southern states until the 1960s – as is shown by the bitter clashes between

Irish-Americans and African-Americans over forced public school busing that convulsed the Boston area throughout the 1970s.[7]

If a generation ago neither the Irish nor Irish-Americans would have considered their historical experiences to have paralleled those of African slaves and their American descendants, and Jimmy Rabbitte's comments on page and screen evoked laughter for their hyperbolic nature rather than nods of approval at their accuracy, why, over the past two decades, has the figure of the 'Irish slave' become increasingly visible in culture and politics on both sides of the Atlantic? Why has it been deployed as a symbol, variously, of England's colonial tyranny over Ireland; of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans' prejudices against Irish Catholic immigrants; and, most significantly, of the allegedly non-racial nature of Atlantic plantation slavery – and thus of the moral bankruptcy of demands from African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans for reparations, and of anti-racist movements such as Black Lives Matter? Where did this image of 'Irish slavery' come from? Why has it gained so much traction in such a short period of time? And what can historians do to combat the not merely inaccurate but dangerous idea that Irish men, women and children constituted 'the forgotten white slaves' of the New World?[8]

The foundational text of the myth of Irish enslavement in the Americas is a monograph titled *To Hell or Barbados: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ireland*, published in 2000 by the journalist Sean O'Callaghan. Viewing relations between England and Ireland in the seventeenth century through the prism of ethnic cleansing, a concept associated with the descent of the former Yugoslavia into genocidal warfare among its diverse ethnic and religious populations throughout the 1990s, O'Callaghan claimed that the political prisoners taken by Oliver Cromwell's forces during their conquest of Ireland in the 1650s, some of whom are recorded as having been exiled to England's fledgling West Indian colonies, 'were not sent as indentured servants, but were sold in perpetuity to the sugar planters of Barbados. They became the first white slaves in relatively modern times, slaves in the true sense of the word, owned body and soul by their masters.' O'Callaghan proceeds to make increasingly lurid, *Mandingo*-esque claims about the experiences these Irish exiles in Barbados allegedly endured: that Irish women were sold as sex slaves to English planters who operated 'stud farms' and forced them to mate with African men; that racially mixed plantation slave drivers stripped Irish women naked before 'satisf[ying] their lust by taking them from the rear', and that homosexual male English settlers purchased Irish boys with whom they fulfilled their sexual fantasies. Throughout *To Hell or Barbados*, O'Callaghan commits many of the methodological sins against which historians caution their students: when primary sources are not available to support a particular point, he bases his arguments on assumptions

and assertions ('As there is no record of how the Irish on the slave ships were treated, we have to assume that they were treated exactly the same as African slaves'); he draws upon evidence from other periods and locations in West Indian history and applies it uncritically to mid-seventeenth-century Barbados; he seizes upon the most horrific examples of the abuses endured by enslaved Africans and asserts that all of these horrors were perpetually visited upon Irish servants; and he relies heavily on highly problematic secondary sources, chief among which is an article published in 1883 in a Guyanese newspaper by a British army officer whose principal qualification to tell the story of the Irish 'white slaves' of the seventeenth century was that he had previously been stationed in the West Indies.[9]

Not surprisingly, O'Callaghan's book has received harsh criticism from scholars of early modern Irish history, including Nini Rodgers, Liam Hogan and Donald Harman Akenson; the latter described it as 'an end-of-the-pier act that is just a shade short of being hate literature'.[10] But although O'Callaghan died just before *To Hell or Barbados* was published, and thus did not promote the book or defend its historical accuracy, it became a best-seller and remains in print today (indeed, it is usually available in the 'Irish History' section at Hodges Figgis, Dublin's oldest and most intellectually prestigious bookseller), continuing to reap enthusiastic reviews on sites such as Amazon and Goodreads, and even inspiring a song of the same name by the Irish folk musician Damien Dempsey. Dempsey's song, released in 2007, includes these lyrics:

> You sent me far cross the sea to be owned
> …
> … a whiplash licks my heels
> And my scorched skin bursts and peels
> Though my people were not made for these burning fields
> …
> Good men like old Wilberforce, they came far too late
> Far too late to save us from the fate
> Of Hell or Barbados.[11]

Many readers found O'Callaghan's argument both fascinating and convincing, including Philip, who wrote on Goodreads in 2009 that 'every Irish man and woman needs to read this book to understand what really happened', and John King, who praised it in 2013 for 'show[ing] how complex and multi layered Irish history is'.[12] Google Books' listing of literally hundreds of works whose titles include the phrase 'hidden history' is evidence that many readers are attracted to the idea of learning about an aspect of the past that appears to have been, until recently, deliberately suppressed. And the historiography of the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland leaves no doubt as to the brutality with which the Lord Protector carried

out his campaign, and the contempt that he and many English people of his era felt towards Irish Catholics. If 'Old Noll' loathed and feared the Irish so much that he permitted his soldiers to massacre both combatants and civilians, as they did at Drogheda and Wexford, it is not difficult to imagine that he might have ordered the survivors to be sold into chattel slavery in the English colonies. As Jerome Handler and Matthew Reilly have observed, O'Callaghan's depiction of the fate of Irish political prisoners who were sent to the Caribbean is replete with errors and exaggerations, but it dovetails neatly with 'the historical narrative that stresses Cromwell's brutal subjugation of Ireland'; with the far longer history of hostilities between England and Ireland; and with narratives of Irish victimisation at English hands, epitomised by the 'no blacks, no Irish, no dogs' signs that were allegedly all too common among London landlords and publicans in the 1950s.[13]

Prior to the publication of O'Callaghan's book, the experiences of Irishmen and women in the seventeenth-century English West Indian colonies had not received much attention from historians, at least in part because of the limited corpus of primary sources that describe them. The most substantive works on this subject were a pair of articles that appeared in quick succession in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, the leading journal of early American and Atlantic history: Riva Berleant-Schiller's 'Free labor and the economy in seventeenth-century Montserrat' and Hilary McD. Beckles's ' "A riotous and unruly lot": Irish indentured servants and freemen in the English West Indies, 1644–1713'. Whereas the former essay centred on the attempts of Montserrat's early Irish settlers to find their physical and economic niche within the island, the latter took a more radical perspective, arguing that Irish indentured servants in the West Indies were, echoing the title of one of Beckles's previous articles, 'Black men in white skins', forced into a state of 'proto-slavery'. According to Beckles, many of these men (and throughout the seventeenth century the great majority of the Irish inhabitants of these islands were male) lived and worked in conditions that were no better than those experienced by enslaved Africans. They faced the additional disadvantage that enslaved people were valuable objects of property, and might thus merit better treatment from their owners than short-term indentured servants did. Beckles asserted that, because these Irishmen appeared to have lost the privileges that West Indian society associated with whiteness – wealth, land ownership, political rights and personal liberty – they were in some instances willing to make common cause with the enslaved among whom they worked and lived, even on occasion joining with them in rebellion against their hated English enslavers.[14]

The reality that these men experienced was a bit more complicated. In my 2010 monograph *Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670–1776*, I argued that the Irish inhabitants of the English West Indian colonies

throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were not desperate and miserable 'black men in white skins' who suffered constant victimisation by a rapacious and prejudiced English plantocracy. Many of them were men, and occasionally women, drawn from the tenantry of the estates of wealthy Irish Catholics, most notably the 'Fourteen Tribes' of Galway, 'a great tangled cousinry' of long-established and cosmopolitan mercantile families from the west of Ireland who dispatched their younger sons and nephews to the West Indian colonies in order to expand their trading networks across the Atlantic. While these people of peasant stock were undoubtedly socially and economically subordinate to members of such 'Tribal' families as the Frenches, the Lynches and the Blakes, the latter did not despise them for their Irish ethnicity and their Catholic faith, which they shared, nor did they view them as comparable to enslaved Africans in either legal or racial terms. In many cases, these Irish servants were able to establish themselves in non-plantation employment at the end of their indentures, frequently as artisans or small independent cultivators. Rather than being viewed by the planters as a bestial rabble whose loyalty to white authority was always in doubt, they were valued as a population that could be mobilised in the defence of the islands against foreign invasion or slave rebellion, and being of Irish heritage and Catholic faith (as long as the latter was practised discreetly and in private) was not an insuperable obstacle to the acquisition of wealth, social status and even political office.[15] These conclusions are echoed in the most recent study of Irish experiences in the English West Indies, Jenny Shaw's *Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean*, which explores in meticulous detail the challenging circumstances that many Irish men and women faced in these settlements, but also emphasises that, while pathways existed that they could follow to improve their situations, no such possibilities existed for African or Afro-Caribbean bondspeople, whom both law and custom designated as an inherently and permanently subordinated group.[16]

Despite the considerable popular, if not critical, success of O'Callaghan's book, the image of the Irish man or woman whose experience of servitude in the West Indies was indistinguishable from the enslavement of Africans therein was little known in the United States prior to the 2008 publication of Don Jordan and Michael Walsh's *White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America*. Although neither author was trained as a historian – Jordan is a film and television producer and Walsh a journalist and television presenter – the book was published by New York University's respected scholarly press. *White Cargo* takes a far broader perspective on the subject of 'white slavery' than *To Hell or Barbados*; Jordan and Walsh assert that English and Scots were also subjected to enslavement, and that this phenomenon existed in the New England and Chesapeake colonies as well as in the West Indies. But the authors devote most of their attention to the

experiences of the Irish, and they assert that, in the course of the Cromwellian conquest, Ireland was subjected to 'ethnic and religious cleansing', and that the nation 'became a major source of slaves for the New World'.[17] Because Jordan and Walsh claim that whites were enslaved not only in England's Caribbean colonies but in those that would be incorporated into the United States, the figure of the Irish slave arrived in North America, and became incorporated into American popular historical discourse.

The idea that Irishmen and women had suffered enslavement at the hands of Protestant Anglo-Americans played neatly into the longstanding narrative of the centuries-long mistreatment both of Irish migrants and of their Irish-American descendants, a story familiar in well-known cultural texts from the Civil War-era folk tune 'Paddy's lamentation' to recent films such as *Gangs of New York*. If it seems plausible to some Irish readers that Oliver Cromwell would have sentenced those who had fought against him to life-long slavery in England's plantation colonies, it strikes some contemporary Irish-Americans as equally possible; they may not recall the atrocities of the 1650s as vividly as those who have grown up and been educated in Ireland, but they are deeply aware of the 'No Irish need apply' signs that were sup-posedly ubiquitous throughout the nineteenth-century United States, as well as of the cartoons of, amongst others, Thomas Nast, which depicted Irish people as ape-like beasts whose laziness, stupidity and alcoholism made them the least desirable of white immigrants.[18] Although *White Cargo* was dismissed by academic historians as an unreliable and misleading work, because of its repeated conflation of slavery and indentured servitude it has not only remained in print with New York University Press but was praised by the Nobel Prize-winning African-American novelist Toni Morrison, who used it as a source for her 2008 novel *A Mercy*, which depicts white, black and Native American characters enduring varying forms of servitude in seventeenth-century America. More significantly, *White Cargo*'s provoca-tive subtitle and its striking cover image, of a pair of white hands bound with rope, have gone on to inspire an internet meme that posits as equiva-lent black chattel slavery and white indentured servitude in the Americas, an equation that has in recent years been eagerly embraced within the USA's burgeoning white nationalist movement.

It is crucial to emphasise that there is no evidence whatsoever that O'Callaghan, Jordan or Marsh were/are racists. While most scholars are highly dubious with regard to their methodologies and sources, they wrote their books with the goal of illuminating what they considered to be the 'hidden history' of the relationship between race and slavery in the Atlantic world. That these works are among the best known of the texts (the majority of which are far less well researched and historically objective than theirs) that have served as inspirations to racist activists is in no way their fault, nor was it

their intention. Although *To Hell or Barbados* was published just twenty years ago, and *White Cargo* almost a decade later, the political and cultural contexts into which they emerged seem almost unreachably distant from today's often toxic social media world. Why, then, has their promulgation of the myth of Irish slavery been so influential in the formation of the contemporary white nationalist/'alt-right' movement within the United States?

According to the prolific and well-respected independent scholar Liam Hogan, the internet meme of the 'Irish slave' first appeared in 2013, when an article called 'The Irish slave trade – The forgotten "white" slaves' first published in 2008, went viral on Facebook, on which it has now been shared almost a million times. Illustrated with the cover image from *White Cargo*, though without its authors' endorsement, and first published on the website of Global Research, a Canadian non-profit group that proclaims on its homepage that 'in an era of media disinformation, our focus has essentially been to center on the "unspoken truth"', this short essay, written by John Martin, about whom no information is available, asserts that 'if anyone, black or white, believes that slavery was only an African experience, then they've got it completely wrong'.[19] But while historians may bridle at the inaccuracy of this claim, the fact is that popular history, whether that of the United States, of Ireland or of any other nation, has long been replete with misunderstandings, omissions, exaggerations and outright myths, tendencies accelerated by the rise of social media. Scholars of the history of Atlantic slavery may deplore mischaracterisations such as the equation of white indentured servitude and African chattel slavery, but why should such errors seem innately more problematic than the endless speculations engaged in by huge numbers of people regarding the 'truth' about who really assassinated President Kennedy, or whether German Second World War general Erwin Rommel was truly a Nazi?

Why? Because the meme of the Irish slave is currently being deployed not only as a symbol of an alleged historical atrocity, but as a weapon with which to undermine current initiatives to redress past and present racial injustices – against African-Americans, not the Irish. Circulated by far-right groups ranging from the Tea Party to the Sons of Confederate Veterans to the neo-Nazi Stormfront and White Aryan Resistance, the claim that white people (sometimes specifically described as 'Irish' – in 2015, 10 per cent of Americans claimed to be of Irish descent, the second largest ancestry group in the United States – and otherwise simply referred to as 'white') were enslaved just as were people of African heritage is frequently used in attempts to invalidate the claims of African-Americans that they have, since their earliest arrival in what would become the United States, been treated in a uniquely cruel and unequal manner, and that the source of this abuse was and remains racism on the part of white Americans.[20] Just as some

white Americans' response to the Black Lives Matter movement has been the counter-claim that 'All Lives Matter', the myth of the Irish slave, arising as it does from centuries of conflicts over imperialism, nationality, religion and race, can be and is used to sabotage the assertions of black Americans that their sufferings have been both extreme and exceptional, and, more importantly, that they continue to have a devastating effect on black life chances, and are thus not just something for modern black Americans to 'get over'. If whites too endured slavery, the argument runs, why have they been able to become economically, politically and educationally successful in the United States, and, at least as importantly, why have they relinquished their resentments over their ancestors' sufferings? And, then, why are many African-Americans still embittered about their past, and why do they feel that they deserve reparations or other forms of redress from white America? As a white man from Mississippi stated in a 2015 article in the *Washington Post*, 'Even the Irish, we were slaves. At some point, you just have to get over it.' This claim was echoed the following year by the then Fox News host (and now partner of Donald Trump Jr) Kimberly Guilfoyle, herself of Irish descent, who asserted that 'the Irish got over it. They don't run around going "Irish Lives Matter." '[21] Thus, the trope of the alleged enslavement of white men and women, and of the Irish in particular, has been mobilised both to bolster a discourse of white victimhood and to deny the significance of the historical and contemporary abuse of African-Americans.

But if historians of the Anglo-Atlantic world do not believe that the Irish or other white migrants, despite the numerous disadvantages they may have suffered, were subjected to chattel slavery in the West Indies or North America, and if they do not expect African-Americans to 'get over' their own and their ancestors' experiences of racist abuse, especially in the face of the increase in verbal and physical violence against people of colour by white nationalist groups, by some police officers and by many contemporary politicians, how can they mobilise their historical expertise to dismantle this meme and strip it of its alarming power?

One way to do so is to advocate, not just as individuals but through national professional organisations, for academic historians to play a more significant role in the development of primary- and secondary-school history curricula. In the United Kingdom, many students, parents, teachers and academics deplore the fact that the current National Curriculum offers few opportunities to study either black British history or the history of British imperialism. This lacuna has been defended by former education secretary Michael Gove and other influential Conservative politicians with the argument that the goal of school-level history instruction is to teach children Britain's 'island story', a story that, Gove and his supporters claim, barely involved people of colour prior to the post-Second World War migration to

Britain of imperial subjects from the Caribbean, Asia and Africa.[22] But the situation is far more problematic in the United States, in which it is much more difficult than in the United Kingdom to claim that slavery occurred 'somewhere else', or that people of African descent were until recently a very small segment of the national population. Yet most American schoolchildren are taught very little about the history of slavery and racial inequalities in their country. Sometimes this silence stems from educators' reluctance to criticise any aspect of the nation's past, especially that which involves slave-holding national heroes such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, or it may come from a sense, conscious or otherwise, that the American story was and is really the story of white people. It may be the result of benevolent intentions, to downplay uncomfortable aspects of history that might generate feelings of resentment or guilt among students of different races and ethnicities. In some cases, it has a financial aspect: school districts may be unable or unwilling to invest in more up-to-date history textbooks that bring racial issues to the fore, and textbook authors and publishers are aware that educational materials problematising the triumphalist narrative of American history are unlikely to be adopted in more conservative districts, and are thus financially unviable.

The study of the history of slavery and race is well developed within both British and American academia. The majority of university history departments in both countries offer undergraduate and master's-level modules on topics such as the Atlantic slave trade, the plantation system, the black American/British experience and the civil rights movement, and produce new doctorates whose dissertations focus on these areas. It is difficult to imagine an academic conference in American history that would not include a significant number of papers or panels related to the African-American experience, and increasingly gatherings of historians of Britain include in their programmes scholarship on topics related to slavery, race and empire. A high percentage of US universities, including those in the south, sponsor programmes or institutes that centre on the study of race, and over the past two decades UK institutions have followed this path, establishing such facilities for research and public outreach as the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation at the University of Hull, and the Centre for the Study of International Slavery at the University of Liverpool. But despite the dogged efforts of professional organisations such as the American Historical Association and the Royal Historical Society to persuade educational decision-makers to expand primary- and secondary-school curricula, neither system has yet seen significant changes in the teaching of the history of slavery and race. But this is an area in which scholars must continue with their efforts, rather than disengaging from what may seem an unpromising struggle – the stakes are simply too high for us to withdraw.

Whether or not the fault lies primarily with the schools, the fact remains that many contemporary Britons and Americans have little understanding of the actual nature of slavery. Even those who may be willing to acknowledge white responsibility for past and present racial injustices are sometimes deeply unaware of the specific nature of this exploitation. For example, after the release in 2013 of black British filmmaker Steve McQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave*, some viewers were shocked to realise that it was far from uncommon for enslaved girls and women to experience sexual and physical violence from their owners. Many people tend to focus their indignation about the history of slavery on the various types of abuse that enslaved people endured: the ever-present threat of harsh physical punishment, an unending routine of gruelling and uncompensated physical labour, constant surveillance by owners and overseers, and a very low material standard of living. Of course, the majority of enslaved African-Americans endured these forms of abuse, but many 'free' labourers in both historical and contemporary contexts experienced or are experiencing labour conditions that are nearly as exploitative and immiserating as plantation slavery. British and American media report frequently not only on the terrible working and living conditions of Asian migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates but on their employers' seizure of their passports, and on the unsafe working condition founds in the warehouses of Amazon and SportsDirect. But if we depict the horror of enslavement as having to labour in miserable conditions, we really miss the point, particularly in drawing parallels between slavery and indentured servitude in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-American world. Yes, many white servants, Irish or otherwise, found the experience of indentured labour extremely difficult. It was the combination of improved possibilities at home and growing awareness of the miseries of colonial indenture that resulted in a decline in the availability of white servants, and thus an increased dependence on enslaved people of African descent as a plantation labour force. But the fact remains that indentured servitude was neither racialised nor inheritable, and those who survived their years of service would regain their liberty and, with hard work and a measure of luck, might significantly improve their economic and social status. As W. E. B. DuBois stated in *Black Reconstruction*, 'no matter how degraded the [white] factory hand, he is not real estate'.[23] But in all but the most exceptional circumstances, an enslaved person would remain enslaved, and could not plan or even realistically hope for a better future for him/herself or for his/her children. This, more than anything, is the line that separates servitude from enslavement, and that gives the lie to the previously discussed attempts to transform the Irish servant into the white slave.

It may be comforting to attribute the frequent blurring of this line between servitude and slavery to either malice or ignorance on the part of

contemporary white nationalists, but I urge scholars who are concerned about the political effects of this conflation to make every effort to correct the misuse, over centuries, of the term 'slavery'. Many idealistic reformers, whether in the American Revolution, in the campaign for women's suffrage or in turn-of-the century initiatives against forced prostitution, have described themselves or those for whom they claimed to speak as 'slaves' when, no matter how deep their sufferings may have been, this category was simply not applicable to their situations. We can see this same problematic conception of 'slavery' at work today in the activities of non-profit organisations such as Anti-Slavery International. These campaigners' dedication to raising awareness of and combating such evils as sex-trafficking, child marriage and bonded labour is entirely admirable, but collapsing these practices under the umbrella of 'slavery' amplifies the sufferings of the present by muting those of the past.[24] In the majority of situations to which these groups respond, the individuals who have been forced into various types of uncompensated or coerced labour, trafficked into sex work, or compelled to marry without their consent are not considered chattel in legal terms; they have not forfeited their human rights, and their servitude is not passed on to their children. If they run away from their captors, the latter cannot expect law enforcement officials to locate them and return them to servitude, and it is those captors who will face legal consequences for their actions. When confronted with horrific accounts of unfree labour that range from eastern European and African girls being trafficked to European cities to work in the sex industry to English teenagers from troubled backgrounds who have been groomed to join 'county lines' drug-dealing gangs, this distinction may seem semantic, but misconceptions regarding the nature of slavery, as opposed to other forms of forced labour and related abuses, have unfortunately contributed to the power of the image of 'Irish slavery', and thus have worked to minimise the sufferings of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Americas.

The problems that can result from this linguistic slippage are encapsulated in a reader's letter published several years ago in the *Guardian* newspaper:

> I was moved to read Jen Wilson's letter about the fortune grabbed by the owners of Penrhyn Castle [a stately home in Wales] from the labour of slaves in their West Indies sugar plantations. When I visited this opulent pile, I was nauseated by the conspicuous consumption of its owners, particularly as I knew their wealth was built on the backs of Welsh slate miners and their families. Slate mines were dangerous places, the work was generally back-breaking, and the workers were not generously paid and were often forced to accept tokens (in lieu of money) that had to be spent at company stores. Anyone British should be ashamed by the exploitation, cruelty and racism of the empire, but it's good to remember that the working class here were enslaved too.[25]

This letter offers a very clear example of the misconceptions engendered by the equation of impoverished people enduring terrible work situations with those who are enslaved. The slate miners of Wales endured difficult and hazardous working conditions and were cruelly exploited by their employers, but they were not legally or physically compelled to remain in these jobs, although it is likely that many felt that they had few other options, owing to a lack of opportunity to gain the skills that would allow them to find better-paid and less onerous work. But the slate miners were not born into this form of labour, and their children were free to seek other types of employment. They were not physically distinct from those who managed and owned the mines, and although they could never match the legal and political advantages such people possessed, they were British subjects who were inherently endowed with basic political and legal rights. Perhaps most importantly, even the most rapacious employers had no power to separate the members of their workers' families, or forcibly to relocate them away from their homes.

In closing, it is incumbent upon all of us who are concerned about this slippage between servitude and slavery, and by its implications in the volatile current political situation, to teach our students well and carefully. Works such as those of O'Callaghan and Jordan and Walsh were produced in good faith; their misconceptions stem not from the authors' dishonesty or racism but from their inexcusably sloppy use of sources. For example, the only eyewitness account that depicts in any detail the experiences of Irish indentured servants in the seventeenth-century English West Indies, Richard Ligon's *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1657), describes the 'cruelty' with which Ligon claims that some of the English planters treated their servants, but he contrasts these enslavers with those 'merciful' individuals on the island who 'treat their Servants well', and asserts that, in recent years, enslavers in general have become 'discreeter and better natur'd', and now provide their indentured labour force with a reasonable work regimen and decent living conditions.[26] Ligon's vivid narrative of his voyage to and residence in Barbados has been used by nearly every scholar who has studied the history of the West Indies in this period, but even otherwise meticulous historians have tended to emphasise the cruelty and ignore the mercy when writing about the treatment of servants in this context. Historians have no power to right the wrongs of past centuries, and are, alas, very limited in their ability to resolve current injustices, but if we can help our students to interpret whatever sources that previous eras have left for us, and to distinguish between reality and fantasy, fear and wishful thinking, we will have made our small contribution to dismantling a pernicious misconception that mobilises an inaccurate view of the past to undermine the possibilities for racial justice in the present.

Notes

1 *The Commitments*, dir. Alan Parker. The scene can be viewed on YouTube: 'Blacks of Europe', www.youtube.com/watch?v=_e9WDfg2idk (accessed 29 August 2022). The song from which Rabbitte quotes is 'Say it loud – I'm black and I'm proud', written by Brown and Alfred 'Pee Wee' Ellis in 1968 and released the following year on Brown's King Records album of the same name.

2 Roddy Doyle, *The Commitments* (London: Vintage, 2013 [1987]), pp. 13, 15. Barrytown, the setting of several of his novels, is a fictional working-class suburb of north Dublin, based upon Kilbarrack, where Doyle grew up; Eoghan Smith and Simon Workman, 'Suburbia in Irish literary and visual culture', in Eoghan Smith and Simon Workman, eds, *Imagining Irish Suburbia in Literature and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 77–95. See also Bryan Fanning, 'Racism in Ireland', in Bryan Fanning, *Racism and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 8–29; Diane Negra, ed., *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); and Bill Rolston, 'Are the Irish black?', *Race and Class* 41:1–2 (1999), 95–102.

3 Brendan M. Walsh, 'When unemployment disappears: Ireland in the 1990s', CESifo Working Paper 856, February 2003, www.ideas.repec.org/p/ces/ceswps/_856.html (accessed 4 April 2020), p. 1; Patrick Honohan, 'Fiscal adjustment in Ireland in the 1980s', *Economic and Social Review* 23:3 (1992), 258–314.

4 Veronica Crossa, Montserrat Pareja-Eastaway, Josep Miquel Pique and Didier Grimaldi, 'Reinventing the city: Barcelona, Birmingham and Dublin', in Sako Musterd and Alan Murie, eds, *Making Competitive Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 67–92 (p. 73); Kostas Ergazakis, Kostas Metaxiotis and John Psarras, 'An emerging pattern of successful knowledge cities' main features', in Francisco Javier Carrillo, ed., *Knowledge Cities: Approaches, Experiences, and Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 3–15 (p. 8); Mark Crinson, 'Georgianism and the tenements, Dublin 1908–1926', *Art History* 29:4 (September 2006), 625–59 (p. 630). See also Ellen Rowley, *Housing, Architecture and the Edge Condition: Dublin Is Building, 1935–1975* (London: Routledge, 2018).

5 It is worth noting that, in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, some African-American activists and artists conceptualised their struggle for self-determination as parallel to that of Irish political and cultural resistance to English imperial rule; see Evelyn O'Callaghan, 'Black Irish, white Jamaican', *Caribbean Quarterly* 64:3–4 (2018), 392–408 (p. 395); and Kathleen Gough, *Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic: Haptic Allegories* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

6 Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995). See also Sinéad Moynihan, *'Other People's Diasporas': Negotiating Race in Contemporary Irish and Irish American Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), p. 6; and Peter D. O'Neill, *Famine Irish and the American Racial State* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

7 On the Boston busing controversy see Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

8 John Martin, 'The Irish slave trade – the forgotten "white" slaves', Global Research, Centre for Research on Globalization, 14 April 2008, www.globalresearch.ca/the-irish-slave-trade-the-forgotten-white-slaves/31076 (accessed 5 April 2020).

9 Sean O'Callaghan, *To Hell or Barbados: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ireland* (Dingle: Brandon/Mount Eagle Publications, 2000), pp. 93, 119, 87.

10 Liam Hogan, 'Critique of Sean O'Callaghan's *To Hell or Barbados*', https://limerick1914.medium.com/critique-of-sean-ocallaghan-s-to-hell-or-barbados-aea31469d3a2 (accessed 2 September 2022); Nini Rodgers, *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery: 1612–1865* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 38; Donald Harman Akenson, *Ireland, Sweden, and the Great European Migration, 1815–1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), p. 130n62.

11 Damien Dempsey, 'To Hell or Barbados', *To Hell or Barbados* (Sony BMG, 2007). The song's lyrics are available at www.genius.com/Damien-dempsey-to-hell-or-barbados-lyrics (accessed 6 April 2020).

12 Goodreads, www.goodreads.com/book/show/1662002.To_Hell_or_Barbados (accessed 7 April 2020).

13 Jerome S. Handler and Matthew C. Reilly, 'Contesting "white slavery" in the Caribbean', *New West Indian Guide* 91:1–2 (2017), 30–55 (p. 47). Some scholars have cast doubt on the prevalence of both the 'No blacks, no Irish, no dogs' signs and the 'No Irish need apply' variant in nineteenth- and twentieth-century England and the United States. See Richard Jensen, ' "No Irish need apply": A myth of victimization', *Journal of Social History* 36:2 (Winter 2002), 405–29; Donald MacRaild, ' "No Irish need apply": The origins and persistence of a prejudice', *Labour History Review* 78:3 (2013), 269–99; and John Draper, 'No Irish, no blacks, no dogs, no proof', *Guardian*, 21 October 2015, www.theguardian.com/money/2015/oct/21/no-irish-no-blacks-no-dogs-no-proof (accessed 29 August 2022).

14 Riva Berleant-Schiller, 'Free labor and the economy in seventeenth-century Montserrat', *William and Mary Quarterly* 46:3 (1989), 539–64; Hilary McD. Beckles, ' "A riotous and unruly lot": Irish indentured servants and freemen in the English West Indies, 1644–1713', *William and Mary Quarterly* 47 (1990), 503–22; Hilary McD. Beckles, ' "Black men in white skins": The formation of a white proletariat in West Indian slave society', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 15 (1986), 5–21. Beckles's work was the inspiration and the source of much of the historical background for the Irish writer Kate McCafferty's 2002 novel *Testimony of an Irish Slave Girl*, a text that has been described as 'a neo-slave narrative'; O'Callaghan, 'Black Irish, white Jamaican', p. 398.

15 Natalie A. Zacek, *Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670–1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Chapter 2. The phrase 'a great tangled cousinry' is borrowed from Bernard Bailyn, 'Politics and social

structure in Virginia', in James M. Smith, ed., *Seventeenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), pp. 90–115 (p. 111).

16 For example, an Irish indentured servant named Cornelius Bryan, who was punished numerous times for his insubordinate words and acts, as a free man acquired a small plantation and a dozen slaves; Jenny Shaw, *Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans, and the Construction of Difference* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), pp. 144, 154. See also Rodgers, *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery, 1612–1865*.

17 Don Jordan and Michael Walsh, *White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), p. 7.

18 On Nast and his ilk see L. Perry Curtis Jr, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, rev. edn (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997 [1971]).

19 Martin, 'The Irish slave trade.'

20 Drew DeSilver, 'The fading of the green: Fewer Americans identify as Irish', *Fact Tank*, Pew Research Center, 17 March 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/17/the-fading-of-the-green/ (accessed 9 April 2020).

21 'In Mississippi, defenders of state's Confederate-themed flag dig in', *Washington Post*, 18 August 2015; Scott Eric Kaufman, 'Fox News' Kimberly Guilfoyle slams "Black Lives Matter"', *Salon*, 18 March 2016, www.salon.com/2016/03/18/fox_news_kimberly_guilfoyle_you_dont_hear_irish_people_shouting_irish_lives_matter_because_they_got_over_racism/ (accessed 9 April 2020). In fact, Amazon and other online vendors sell 'Irish Lives Matter' T-shirts; www.amazon.com/Irish-Lives-Matter-T-Shirt-Colors/dp/B07N5SJQ2H (accessed 9 April 2020).

22 Michael Gove, 'All children will learn our island story', speech on 5 October 2010, Conservative Party Speeches, www.conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601441 (accessed 10 April 2020). In this address, Gove claims that 'our [English] literature is the best in the world', and lists in support of this statement nine white writers (all except Jane Austen are male), the most recent of whom, Thomas Hardy, died in 1928. He promises to 'put British history at the heart of a revived national curriculum' in response to 'a trashing of our past' that 'denies children the opportunity to hear our island story'.

23 W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013 [1935]), p. 7.

24 The definition of 'modern slavery', as used by Anti-Slavery International, includes 'forced labour', 'debt bondage/bonded labour', 'forced and early marriage' and 'human trafficking'. See 'What is modern slavery?', www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/modern-slavery/ (accessed 10 April 2020).

25 Pippa Richardson, 'Penrhyns enslaved Welsh working class', *Guardian*, 27 November 2017. The letter to which Richardson was responding was published on 22 November 2017; www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/22/historians-working-towards-a-full-imperial-reckoning-for-britain) (accessed 29 August 2022.

26 Richard Ligon, *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (London: Humphrey Moseley, 1657), p. 94.