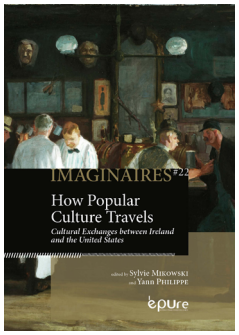

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The Irish as Caribbean Slaves? Meme, Internet Meme and Intervention

Robert Johnson
Ludwig Maximilian Universität – Amerika Institut

Introduction

The meme of Irish slavery is not a new phenomenon, but dates back to at least the mid 1600s and the beginning of servitude as a means for the planter class to guarantee labour outputs in their colonies[1], in the context of the complicated Irish relationship to empire, colonisation, colonial labour and slavery.[2] Today's meme is loose on the frontier of human communication on the world wide web in the form of a particular internet meme, with the possibility to infect millions through memetic transfer, the consequences thereof being a widespread dissemination of the idea of the Irish as slaves, at a time of greater cultural conflict in academia as part of conflict among elites,[3] combined with the identification of the idea of Irish slaves as secret or stigmatized knowledge. The primary effect would be to engender sympathy for the colonised, captured or enslaved Irish. When spread as implied suppressed history, this meme also has the effect of undermining currently taught or accepted narratives, and thus those who profess or accept those narratives as well, chipping away at the credibility of the academy, educational institutions, and accepted societal

1. Hilary Beckles & Andrew Downes, "An Economic Formalisation of the Origins of Black Slavery in the British West Indies, 1624–1645", *Social and Economic Studies*, 34 (2), 1985, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27862787 (last accessed 8/11/2020), p. 1-25; Hilary Beckles, *White Servitude and Black Slavery in Barbados, 1627–1715*, Knoxville, Tennessee U.P., 1989, p. 79-81.
2. Robert Johnson, "What to do about the Irish in the Caribbean", *Caribbean Quarterly*, 64 (3-4), 2018, DOI: 10.1080/00086495.2018.1531554, p. 409-433.
3. Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams & Jeremy Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Boston, Longman, 2011, p. 7-8

narratives, strengthening a small thread in the web of conspiracy theory culture.

Public History to Popular History

James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton confirm that while "there is no consensus about the definition and boundaries of public history" that it is "The verbs relating to history are what matter: the activity of doing, presenting, or making history in a range of forms for many different purposes and communicating it to multiple audiences or 'publics' is the main characteristic."[4]

Since the beginning of historical professionalization in the 19th century, public history was organized, if at all, through voluntary cooperation of academic institutions and historical societies, as well as preservation organizations and museums. The field as it existed did not lack professionals, but a unified organizational structure did not emerge until the late twentieth century. Starting in the 1970s, the field coalesced and professionalized as one example in the Americas with the National Council on Public History in 1979.[5]

Public history can thus be defined in the main as the spaces, not necessarily physical, where the academy's work can and does converge with the public. In the past, these convergences took place in print media, film and television documentaries, memorials or museums, and the performing arts.[6] That hasn't changed. However, the textual landscape is increasingly digital.[7] Magazines, newspapers, documentaries, and other journalism have been increasingly digitised[8] and are thus far more readily available. This availability has magnified the ability of lay people and non-historian academics such as historical anthropologists to "do" History.

The issue of access and production takes us from the professional public history to the amateur, leisure or popular historian, which itself is a very broad term that can mean working academics and former academics to social activists to lay people with no historical training whatsoever.

4. James B. Gardner & Paula Hamilton, "The Past and Future of Public History: Developments and Challenges", *The Oxford Handbook of Public History,* Oxford U.P., Oxford, 2017, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199766024.013.29, p. 1-2.
5. https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field (last accessed 6/10/2018).
6. Catherine M. Eagan, "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud: Irish Americans, Irish studies, and the Racial Politics of Hibernophilia in 1990s America", *Working papers in Irish Studies*, 99 (1), 1999, p. 12, n. 73.
7. *The Public Historian*, as one example, the magazine of the National Council on Public History, has made available online all of its content from October 1978 to present.
8. Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, Routledge, London, 2009, p. 91.

Old structures of editing, gatekeeping and filtering are bypassed by the freedom to transmit into the ether what the internet provides. Jerome De Groot, working from Dutton, notes that "gatekeepers of knowledge have to modify their practice or be simply ignored."[9]

The old print interfaces have not been completely replaced. They are at heart, content. And content and text obviously still exist. In fact, after the digital turn they are more important than ever. Whereas before the digital age, discussion of content was necessarily either via print media, on television or face to face, today a host site such as a news site or journal site will set up a forum or comments section to allow an instant gratification of the desire to be more than just a passive observer.

Cultural-studies scholars like John Fiske or Henry Jenkins have discussed at length the participatory nature of "active audiences"[10], suggesting that consumers are cognitively and emotionally making sense of the texts of their television entertainment, and in Jenkins' case, actively shaping that content through participation in fandom and a phenomenon he calls 'poaching.'[11] Likewise, the changes wrought by the internet have made the active audience in popular history spaces an incontestable reality. Structurally, even if a content provider foregoes a comments section, internet platforms of all kinds allow the active audience to create small to massive communities without the consent of the original provider. The main identifiable difference between these active audiences is that the popular amateur, lay or armchair history isn't simply consuming history, they are producing historical work, bypassing Dutton's gatekeeper function[12] and possibly influencing millions of users, much faster than the academy can or could react.

On such social media as Reddit and Facebook, the user and their content are also the product. Data gathering to help advertisers better target consumers as well as advertisements based on the data gathered are the main revenue and thus the reason for these platforms' existence. The interface is textual as opposed to graphic, and user accounts are anonymous. Thus the internet provides non-national spaces that are heavily influenced by Anglo-American popular culture, where data transfer takes place. It is a convergence space where content meets users who are sometimes the product themselves

9. *Ibid.*, p. 91; Please also see William H. Dutton "The Internet and Social Transformation: Reconfiguring Access", in William H. Dutton *et al.* (eds.), *Transforming Enterprise: Economic and Social Implications of Information Technology*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2005, https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/6285375 (last accessed 8/11/2020), p. 341.
10. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 23; also see John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, London, Routledge, 2011.
11. H. Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
12. W. Dutton, art. cit., p. 341-342.

In addition to all the other outlets and drains where public history used to converge, these forums and spaces are now part of the popular discourse. Popular history now resides in large part online. Anything goes, and if it doesn't, if the rules become too stultifying, users can go somewhere else and find a place to suit them. Along with the classical museum, public history's more academic offerings, journals, archives, books, movies, television documentaries, digital tours and audio guides, now take the stage with social media, email chain letters, forum discussions and internet memes as a new, dynamic and not unproblematic frontier along the horizon of history. Traversing that frontier are both the meme and the internet meme of Irish slavery.

The Meme

The term meme was coined in the late 1970s by Professor Richard Dawkins as a "unit of cultural transmission".[13] Meme theory is contested, even by those accepting the foundation of memes' existence. A simple definition of a meme is an idea, behaviour, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture: this underpins the term 'going viral.' Ernst Mayr noted in 1997 that meme is "nothing but an unnecessary synonym of the term "concept."[14] However the existence of culturally transmitted units is not in question, but rather their importance and behaviour and the possibility of quantified empirical study.

Meme also has become an internet jargon term meaning an idea passed from user to user on the internet, often in the form of an infographic or an image with text superimposed.[15] We will refer to these picture and text combinations in themselves as internet memes. The meme of Irish Slavery is often spread exactly through these picture and text combinations.[16] Here are some examples[17].

13. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene,* Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1999, p. 192.
14. Ernst Mayr, "The Objects of Selection", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 94 (6), 1997, DOI: 10.1073/pnas.94.6.2091, p. 2091-2094.
15. Michele Knobel & Colin Lankshear, "Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production", in Michele Knobel & Colin Lankshear (eds.), *A New Literacies Sampler*, New York, Peter Lang, 2007, p. 199-228.
16. Robert Johnson, http://imgur.com/a/1M7Eg "Collected Images of the internet meme "Irish Slavery" (last updated 27/06/2017).
17. Fig. 1 to 6 – Unattributed, Irish slaves meme.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

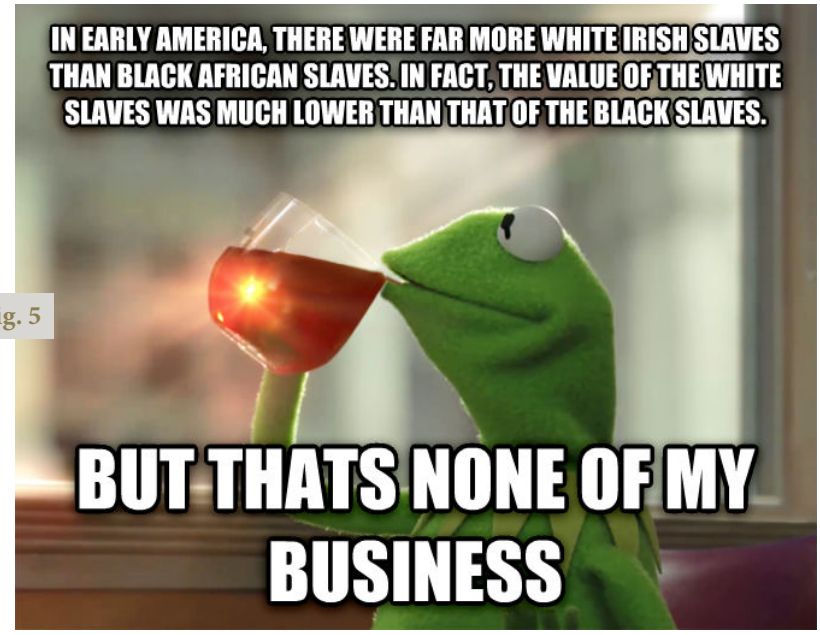

Fig. 5

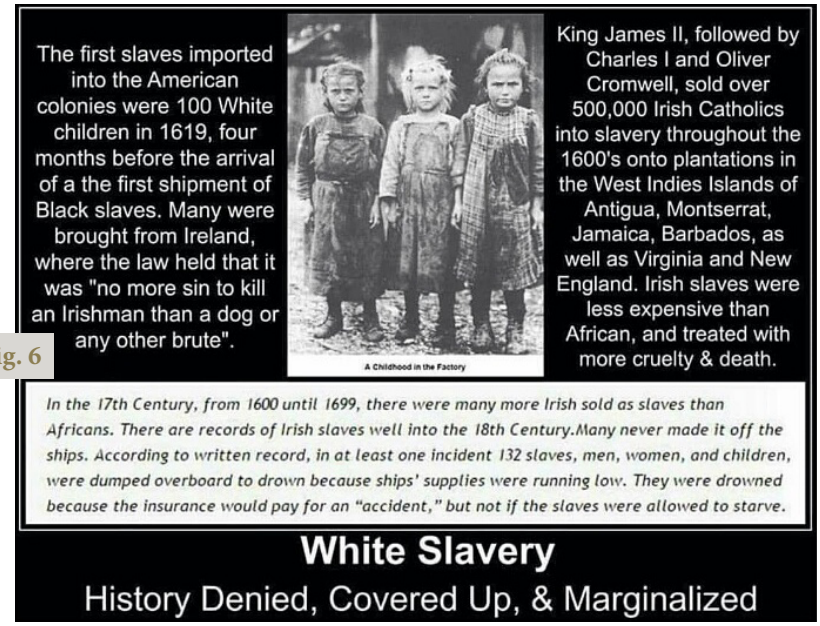

Fig. 6

These images lack original attribution. They are not actually images of Irish slaves. The first image cited below[18] is actually a colorized interpolated version of Lewis Hines' work in the early 20th century to end child labour.[19] The original of this photo hangs in the Luzerne County Pennsylvania Historical Society. Image 6 is also interpolated and also by Lewis Hines. Image 3 was shared from the web by a US state legislator. Image 5 is a composite of Kermit the Frog from Jim Henson's the Muppets. These memes can be constructed from any photo available on the web at a meme generation site. Ready-made memes, made by other prosumers, are also available for download.[20]

The central idea of the meme is that the Irish were slaves, but it often has more detailed implications, such as an equivalence between later Atlantic Chattel slavery and the Irish as an underclass in the Caribbean or the nascent United States.[21]

The people of Ireland were brutally subjugated by Cromwell's Roundheads after a number of revolts in the 17th century. As Cromwell and his occupying generals became increasingly reliant on deporting and permanently exiling their troubles to Barbados rather than outright execution[22], legends of slavery in the Caribbean took hold within the nascent Irish consciousness.[23] Barbados became such a feared and common sentence that the location became a verb whose definition meant to be sent there, never to return.[24]

Post-Restoration, the Irish developed as a people who at the same time were oppressed by and participated in the British Empire.[25] Throughout their post-Cromwellian history[26] resistance or revolutionary movements arose, and the term slavery was used by a number of famous Irish politicians in a manner rhetorically consistent with decolonization and revolution. This is especially true throughout the rocky historical period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which led to the Free State and then the Irish Republic.[27]

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18. *Ibid.*
19. Michael Burgan, *Breaker Boys: How a Photograph Helped End Child Labor*, Mankato (MN), Compass Point, 2012.
20. https://me.me/t/irish-slaves (last accessed 31/10/2018).
21. Please note the text of Fig. 1 and 4.
22. Hilary Beckles, "English Parliamentary Debate on White Slavery in Barbados", *The Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society*, XXXVI, 1982, p. 345.
23. Nini Rodgers, *Ireland, slavery and anti-slavery. 1612-1865,* Basingstoke/New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 2.
24. Thomas Carlyle, *Cromwell's Life and Letters*, Vol. 1, London 1865, p. 541; please also see V. T. Harlow, *A History of Barbados,* London, Clarendon, 1926, p. 295.
25. R. Johnson, art. cit., p. 409-411.
26. Liam Kennedy, *Unhappy the Land: The most oppressed people ever, the Irish?*, Sallins, Merrion, 2016, p. 11-14, more generally also all of chapter 1; please also see L. Kennedy, *Colonialism, Religion, and Nationalism in Ireland*, Belfast, Institute of Irish Studies, 1996, p. 1-4, p. 217-218.
27. *Ibid.*

"Were the Irish enslaved in the Caribbean or elsewhere as Africans were?" is an important if somewhat complex historical question to ask and answer. The question dovetails into the longstanding historical inquiry[28] concerning the status of British colonial servants prior to and after the codification of slavery into law. John Donoghue refers to servitude scholarship as "…disputatious as any other subfield in the historical discipline"[29] and notes that "Scholarly agreement over the scale and demography of 17th century servant migration has come much more easily than any consensus over whether servant migration was essentially a voluntary process."[30]

If the internet meme means to equate the slave or unfree status of the Irish and Africans, then the answer to the question: "Were the Irish enslaved in the Caribbean or elsewhere as Africans were?" is no.

The Atlantic slave system is considered unique in its inhumanity and harshness.[31] No other group was enslaved in the Atlantic world exactly as Africans were enslaved. The utility of the simple answer though is limited in making comparisons. If the position of Africans in the Atlantic World is almost[32] unique in the history of the institution of slavery in North America then no other system could equate it. Thus the simple answer is a tautology.

That pre-emancipation 19th century iteration of Atlantic chattel slavery was not the only form of slavery contemporaneous with the Atlantic system.[33] Additionally the Irish in the Caribbean were, in the frontier period, like most West Indian servants,[34] enduring a period of what Père Labat called *dure servitude*,[35] and what Hilary McDonald Beckles

28. Peter Wood mentions this debate in an interview for the PBS Documentary *Africans in America* at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1i3024.html (last accessed 8/11/2018).
29. John Donoghue, "Indentured Servitude in the 17th Century English Atlantic: A Brief Survey of the Literature", *History Compass*, 11 (10), 2013, DOI: 10.1111/hic3.12088, p. 894.
30. *Ibid*., p. 895.
31. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/slave-route/transatlantic-slave-trade (last accessed 31/10/2018); please also see Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and citizen. The Negro in the Americas*, New York, A. A. Knopf, 1947, p. 48.
32. Kenneth M. Ames, "Slaves, Chiefs and Labour on the Northern Northwest Coast", *World Archaeology* 33, 1, 2001, https://www.jstor.org/stable/827885 (last accessed 6/11/2020), p. 1–17; William Christie MacLeod, "Debtor and Chattel Slavery in Aboriginal North America.", *American Anthropologist* 27, 3, 1925, https://www.jstor.org/stable/660990 (last accessed 6/11/2020), p. 375.
33. Other examples include The North African slavery of the Barbary States, The propertied elite servants of the Ottoman Empire as well as the lower orders of *kul*, Russia's крепостной крестьянин, hereditary chattel slaves of Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest, and different orders of slavery in the Spanish and Portuguese Americas.
34. Carl Bridenbaugh & Roberta Bridenbaugh, *No peace beyond the line: The English in the Caribbean, 1624-1690*, New York, Oxford U.P., 1972, p. 17, 112
35. John Eaden (ed.), *The Memoirs of Père Labat. 1693–1707*, Abington on Thames, Routledge, 2014, p. 143, 233-234. The Eaden translation has been checked against the original by certified translator Mme Severine LePage: Jean Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amerique,*

called "slave-like conditions"[36], noting that many servants experienced or considered their servitude "as a form of enslavement" and that "Irish servants in general experienced servitude as an oppressive labour system in which their condition was nearer slavery than freedom."[37] But these statements notwithstanding, neither Beckles, nor Williams nor Patterson is making the argument the Irish were "slaves in the sense that Blacks were."[38] They don't have to have done so. They don't need to have been slaves to have been horrifically oppressed. Beckles and Williams would both argue and be correct that the inability of the Planter class to horrifically oppress the Irish and other servants fully and permanently in order to squeeze every last labour output of them, is what led to the die off of indentured servitude as the main labour source in the Caribbean and the transition to a permanent slave model. While many Irish were dying in misery in conditions far nearer to slavery than freedom,[39] other Irish people were prospering in the same colonies[40] thus demonstrating the complexity of the issue.

The Irish Condition in the Caribbean Was Not Simple

The Irish were not slaves in the sense that Blacks were. This is the main error of the internet meme and of those who would equate the unfree Irish and unfree Black slaves of a century or more later. If we consider that both groups were enslaved, which could be considered legitimate in a framework using a very general definition of slavery, the utility of the consideration becomes limited because the definition of slavery being used would have to be broad to encompass both conditions. So broad in fact, that any unfree person in the 17th century becomes a slave under such a definition and the word itself ceases to have any real meaning. And there were many unfree people in the Atlantic World and in Europe in the 17th century. The idea that such consideration would blur lines or be dangerous[41] is nonsense. Dangerous and problematic concepts are what academics are supposed to be able to deal with. But there is no way other than forward and there is no work to be done other than to tell the truth, in good faith, so far as we can and do the best and most detailed work

contenant l'histoire naturelle de ces pays, l'origine, les moeurs, la religion & le gouvernement des habitans anciens & modernes. Les guerres & les evenemens singuliers qui y sont arrivez pendant le séjour que l'auteur y a fait. Par le P. Labat, de l'ordre des Frères prêcheurs, Paris, Guillaume Cavelier, 1742, vol. 6, p. 196 and vol. 7, ARK: 12148/bpt6k114024q, p. 359-360.

36. H. Beckles, "A riotous and unruly lot", art. cit., p. 511; H. Beckles, *op. cit*., 1989, p. 8.
37. H. Beckles, "A riotous and unruly lot", art. cit., p. 511.
38. H. Beckles, *op. cit*., p. 6.
39. C. & R. Bridenbaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 160; the Bridenbaughs note that death rate among servants was very high.
40. R. Johnson, art. cit. p. 312
41. Donald Akenson, *If the Irish ran the world: Montserrat, 1630-1730*, London, Liverpool U.P., 1997, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7zr1h (last accessed 8/11/2020), p. 49, 309.

possible. This highlights and foreshadows some of the academic pushback against the internet meme that is actually factually incorrect and doesn't stand up to scrutiny or source analysis.[42]

As indicated above, the meme of Irish Slavery predates the internet, and even the digital age. The question of exactly how free or unfree the Irish and servants in general were goes back to the beginning of colonisation. In 1659 the English Parliament was petitioned by two labourers who had been convicted in the pro royalist Penruddock uprising of 1655 and sent to Barbados as punishment.[43] The petitioners claimed to have been "sold into slavery" as "chattels" and that they were being bought and sold, still used as payment for debts being "attached as horses and beasts for the debt of their masters, whipped at the whipping post for their master's pleasure and in many other ways made miserable beyond expression or Christian imagination."[44]

The petitioners were not Irish, but English. The reply in parliamentary debate was that the idea that these convicted and exiled Englishmen were slaves was "false and scandalous". That all persons were sent over with a contract of indenture of their own free will, "that the work is hard, but none are sent without their consent…it is not so odious as it is represented to you."[45]

As Michael Guasco noted in 2014:

> Critics characterised indentured servitude as slave-like because servants could be bought and sold. Indentured servants were property, but the idea that human beings could be bought and sold as mere commodities was a disquieting notion in an Atlantic world where Englishmen prided themselves – as Richard Jobson noted in the context of Africa in the 1620s – on their unwillingness to make merchandise of men. That human beings could be bought and sold like chattel horrified many Englishmen.[46]

Thus the meme itself goes back to the roots of colonisation and slavery in the new world. The most current development is not affirmation or denial of Irish slavery, but the speed and reach that it has attained due to the internet's intersection with popular history.

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42. R. Johnson, art. cit. p. 314
43. Thomas Burton, *Parliamentary Diary, 1656–1659*, 4 vols., London, Henry Colburn, 1828, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000769035 (last accessed 8/11/2020), p. 255-258.
44. *Ibid.*; please also see H. Beckles, "English Parliamentary Debate on White Slavery in Barbados," art. cit., p. 346.
45. T. Burton, *op. cit.* p. 259.
46. Michael Guasco, *Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania U.P., 2014, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjm8w (last accessed 8/11/2020), p. 172-176.

This change in speed is evident in a modern pre-digital age example of the Irish Slaves Meme, from the *New York Times* dated from 1989, which begins as a correction to the minutiae of a previous article.

On July 27, 1989 *The New York Times* published an article on banking fraud in Montserrat. Therein they referred to the Finance and Chief Minister of the island as "a descendant of the early Irish settlers of Montserrat and the African slaves who worked the plantations."[47]

The correction from a private citizen James MacGuire read, "The early Irish in the Caribbean were also slaves, not 'settlers'. They were impressed in the wake of the Cromwellian invasion of Ireland in the mid-17th century and the massive land confiscations and Protestant plantations that followed it."[48]

Robert St. Cyr, President of the Leeward Island Inns, responded to MacGuire's editorial with a letter of his own stating: "The first Irish were deported to Montserrat from the neighbouring St. Kitts and from Virginia in the early 1630s, about a decade before Cromwell invaded Ireland. [...]"[49] This exchange took months. We have no means of referencing who read it. Today it would be near instantaneous and possibly reach millions or be buried in the deluge of information that is the web.

We can see here a division between the meme itself which has existed in one form or another since the 1600s and the internet meme, which could not by definition exist until the informational changes brought on by the World Wide Web.

The wording of the internet meme is necessarily short, due to space concerns, and ignores the complexity of the Irish situation in the Caribbean and the rest of British North America for a quick and thus necessarily unnuanced equivocation of Irish suffering and even captivity with the suffering of later generations of African slaves. As I have written elsewhere: "Social media favours simplicity. This not a simple topic."[50] The texts vary, there are some oft encountered examples "Irish Slaves – What The History Books Will Never Tell You"[51] "White Irish slaves were treated worse than any other race in the U.S. … when was the last time you heard

47. Joseph B. Treaster, "Plymouth Journal; On Tiny Isle of 300 Banks, Enter Scotland Yard", *New York Times,* July 27, 1989, https://nyti.ms/29mgMbz (last accessed 1/11/2017).
48. James MacGuire, "Irish in West Indies Went There as Slaves", *New York Times* 16 August 1989, https://nyti.ms/29rOsAA (last accessed 1/11/2017).
49. Robert St. Cyr, "Irish in Caribbean before Cromwell's Time", 16 September 1989, https://nyti.ms/29yIdxX (last accessed 11/01/2017).
50. R. Johnson, art. cit., p. 58
51. Royce Chrystin, "Irish Slaves – What The History Books Will Never Tell You", 1 November 2017, https://newspunch.com/the-irish-slaves-what-they-will-never-tell-you-in-history (last accessed 31/10/2018).

an Irish bitching [sic] about how the world owes them a living?"[52] "Irish Power- First American Slaves United" "Public Schools don't teach you this - Black Slaves were expensive but Irish slaves were cheap."[53]

The internet meme's stated or intended purposes can be deduced as follows. Firstly to inform the observer of the fact of Irish slavery. Secondly to hook the observer's interest with a novel idea or "secret, suppressed or stigmatized knowledge."[54] Thirdly to establish an equivocation of African Slavery, and Irish Slavery. Fourth to make a further comparison of Irish "success" to Black failure to thrive in North America. Lastly, the internet memes often link to articles with further details.

The links can lead anywhere: to further image collections, to Wikipedia, to books, or to videos. One common thread on the internet leads to an article from Globalresearch.ca, a conspiracy and revisionist website which posted its original version in 2008.[55] The globalreasearch.ca article lists no sources, and is by strict journalistic standards sensational. For our purposes here, the main sin, (and there are many) is that it uses inflated numbers with no evidence to establish that: "There is little question that the Irish experienced the horrors of slavery as much (if not more in the 17th Century) as the Africans did.", and that: "But, if anyone, black or white, believes that slavery was only an African experience, then they've got it completely wrong." Finally stating that "These are the lost slaves; the ones that time and biased history books conveniently forgot."[56] There are two important facets at work here. One, again, the equivocation, or even magnification of Irish suffering over that of Africans in the Atlantic world. The second, more subtle, is the hidden knowledge or revelation that the Atlantic slave narrative as currently known, accepted and taught in schools is a lie or hobbled by the omission of the real truth about the Irish. Who themselves were the first and real (if judged by suffering alone) slaves. It is a gateway to conspiracy theory. In this context, the conspiracy is that not only were the Irish slaves in every sense of the word: they were also more enslaved than the accepted slaves of the normative Atlantic slavery narrative, *i.e.* black slaves, and that history is being suppressed.

One of the most cited books in this context is journalist Sean O'Callaghan's *To Hell or Barbados*[57]. *To Hell or Barbados* was a very

52. Please see the texts of internet meme Fig. 1, 2, 3.
53. Jacob Ogles, "Ray Blacklidge feels backlash to 'Irish slaves' meme", 6 August 2018, http://floridapolitics.com/archives/270842-ray-blacklidge-feels-backlash-to-irish-slaves-meme (last accessed 31/10/2018).
54. Michael Barkun, "Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge", *Diogenes*, 1, 2016, DOI: 10.3917/dio.249.0168, p. 1-7.
55. Martin, John, "The Forgotten White Slaves.", http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-irish-slave-trade-the-forgotten-white-slaves/31076 (last accessed 8/02/2016).
56. *Ibid.*
57. Sean O'Callaghan, *To Hell or Barbados*, Dingle (Ireland), Brandon, 2000.

popular book that confirmed what Nini Rodgers calls fuzzy legends of slavery in Barbados.[58] In confirming these legends in a way that appears legitimate, it supports existing but unsubstantiated slavery narratives in the Diaspora and Irish folk memory and gives foundation to the meme of slavery in the Irish past. This popular book is not only plagued but undone as a reliable source by incomplete scholarship, a certain looseness with citation, and has many inaccuracies numerical and technical.

One important example, with long reaching consequences, on the introductory page says that One historian, the Reverend Aubrey Gwynn, SJ, who did considerable research on the subject in the 1930s, estimated that over 50,000 men, women and children were transported to Barbados and Virginia between 1652– 59."[59]

Aubrey Gwynn actually said the following:

> It would be rash to accept so rhetorical a description at its face value: the number which the author of the MS. gives as having been transported – 50,000 in one year, counting the transportations to the Continent as well as to the West Indies – is certainly an exaggeration, though it may be a fair estimate for the whole period of Commonwealth administration.[60]

Throughout *To Hell or Barbados*, O'Callaghan repeatedly uses that number of 50,000 Irish slaves.[61] Attributed to Gwynn, the number 50,000 turns out to not be based on any kind of reliable framework or evidence.[62] 50,000 Irish men, women and children transported over a period of one, seven or ten years is simply not substantiated anywhere in Gwynn's work, except by O'Callaghan himself. That number has been repeatedly referenced, appearing again and again on the internet in discussions of Irish shipped to Barbados.

Another newer example is journalists and documentarians Don Jordan and Michael Walsh's *White Cargo. The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America.*[63] It is an often cited book on the same subject. While not as inaccurate as O'Callaghan on the numbers, its sourcing is sparse and it takes the word 'slave' and applies it as a single terminology to multiple historical periods and conditions in order to create a

58. Nini Rodgers, *Ireland, slavery and anti-slavery. 1612-1865*, Basingstoke/New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 2.
59. S. O'Callaghan, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
60. Aubrey Gwynn, "Cromwell's Policy of Transportation Part II", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 20 (78), 1931, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30094760 (last accessed 8/11/2020), p. 301.
61. S. O'Callaghan, *op. cit.*, p. 85-86.
62. A. Gwynn, art. cit., p. 301.
63. Don Jordan & Michael Walsh, *White cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White slaves in America*, New York, New York U.P., 2007.

sensationalised account of all bad to truly horrific unfree working conditions in the early colonial period, which it refers to as 'slavery'. There are other books available as well such as paranormal investigator and journalist Rhetta Akamatsu's 2010 book *The Irish Slaves: Slavery, Indenture and Contract Labor Among Irish Immigrants*[64] or Michael Hoffman's 1993 monograph *They Were White and they were Slaves*.[65] Akamatsu's book shows a distinct lack of academic focus, and Hoffman's book deals with colonial America from a broad racialist and conspiracy theory perspective. There is a short chapter therein on the Irish on the mainland called "Irish slaves."[66]

The internet meme leads to claims that the Irish were more debased and worse treated in a clear attempt to replace accepted narratives of black slavery with those of pre-emptive Irish and thus white slavery. As being a slave is associated with being powerless, debased, humiliated, a thing, dishonoured, alienated, the claim to that status must have some benefit in the present day. What is the incentive to label oneself and one's ancestor's the ultimate victim as opposed to typical national or ethnic statements of strength pride and self- worth? In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Irish politicians had clear use for the idea of resisting slavery as a motivation in rebellion or political reform.[67]

In 1996 Liam Kennedy wrote a scathing critique of the Irish culture's inability to let go of their past injustices and at the same time coined the term 'most oppressed people ever', the (acronym MOPE) in what has been called a great essay hidden behind reams of boring economic history. Most Oppressed People Ever, is a term Kennedy coined as a tool in his efforts to free Ireland from what he saw as the debilitating effects of decades of institutionally taught victimhood, leading to dysfunction, aggressive self-righteousness and ethnic blindness.[68]

Kennedy's version used 'most oppressed people ever' as a pejorative term, rather than one of sympathy or a rallying cry. His aim was to convince or compel his readers and countrymen and women that Ireland was not the most oppressed land ever, and snap out of the fugue of 'poor mouthed victimhood.' His essay is not inarguable, and is methodologically flawed, as it does not deal with Irish history of the seventeenth century, or oppression of Irish women through the centuries by Kennedy's own admission, but it does illustrate that the idea of victimhood and even

64. Rhetta Akamatsu, *The Irish Slaves: Slavery, Indenture and Contract Labor Among Irish Immigrants*, Createspace Independent Pub, 2010.
65. Michael Hoffman, *They Were White and They Were Slaves: The Untold History of the Enslavement of Whites in Early America*, Dresden (NY), Wiswell Ruffin House, 1992.
66. *Ibid*. p. 100.
67. L. Kennedy, *op. cit*., p. 11-14.
68. L. Kennedy, art. cit., p. 217-218.

slavery has been part of Irish history and culture for centuries. This contrasts however with the claims of the internet meme that Irish slavery is suppressed or somehow a secret, and implies that the preferred hosts for the internet meme are not only the Irish.

Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, two American sociologists, have published findings which strongly suggest that moral culture, which is the sociological term for the prominent means and methods of conflict and social control, is changing in the United States[69] from a culture of dignity which was preceded by a culture of honour,[70] to a culture of victimhood.

> A culture of victimhood is one characterized by concern with status and sensitivity to slight combined with a heavy reliance on third parties. People are intolerant of insults, even if unintentional, and react by bringing them to the attention of authorities or to the public at large. Domination is the main form of deviance[71] and victimization a way of attracting sympathy, so rather than emphasize either their strength or inner worth; the aggrieved emphasize their oppression and social marginalization.[72]

In this kind of culture and analytic framework, victimhood has the benefit of attracting third party support, and could explain the assumption of victim roles in this phenomenon.

Diane Negra and Catherine Eagan both noted separately in *The Irish in Us* "that the Irish memory of suffering is used as a device in American diversity narratives."[73] A 1996 *Village Voice* editorial by noted Irish playwright Lawrence Osbourne noted flatly that the Irish aren't actually black (noting the Irish use of their suffering as a discursive currency and implying a stronger legitimacy to black suffering than Irish) in a non-academic critique of the Irish trying to capitalize on past suffering for a "certain politically correct cachet."[74] Negra and Eagan critique assumedly well off Irish Americans who identify strongly with Irish Famine victims as a means of obtaining a certain politically correct credibility. Negra calls this

69. Bradley Campbell & Jason Manning, "Microaggressions and Moral Cultures", *Comparative Sociology*, 13 (6), 2014, DOI: 10.1163/15691330-12341332, p. 692.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 721. Violence isn't necessary as the individual's dignity does not require violence to preserve itself whereas honour seemingly does. "Members of honor cultures might call attention to offenses against themselves, but only as a way of pressuring the offender to agree to a violent confrontation."
71. *Ibid.*, p. 692–726. Deviance is used throughout in the sociological sense i.e. behaviors that go against social norms, traditions and or even formal rules.
72. *Ibid.* p. 695
73. Diane Negra, "Irishness, performativity, and popular culture", in Diane Negra (ed.), *The Irish in Us*, Durham, Duke U.P., 2006, p. 1, 6; also please see Catherine Eagan, "Still 'Black' and 'Proud': Irish America and Racial Politics of Hibernophilia", *ibid.*, p. 41.
74. Lawrence Osbourne, "The Uses of Eire: How the Irish Made Up a Civilization", *Village Voice*, June 1996, p. 19-23.

cachet, or credibility "discursive currency."[75] This currency is exactly what those who appeal to strong third parties for support are seeking in claiming victimhood status in Campbell and Manning's victimhood culture.[76]

In these contexts, Irish slavery in the form of the internet meme becomes a weaponised narrative and the Irish who did suffer oppression in the colonisation of the Caribbean have been instrumentalized, possibly in an attempt to either gain or deny discursive currency.

The Intervention

Should academics or even lay people intervene in the meme and the internet meme? If so, how? What sort of interventions have already taken place?

There have been articles, by amateur historian and activist Liam Hogan[77] and interviews which cover the same ground.[78] Articles by or with professionals are not numerous, but there is mention of the meme or internet meme in a number of articles.[79] The meme has been touched on in Akenson, and in articles by historical anthropologists.[80]The internet meme has achieved enough resonance to merit fact checking websites to post permanent articles about the provenance thereof.[81] There is a Wikipedia article about the "myth" of Irish slaves that has survived numerous deletion attempts.[82] Major newspaper outlets such as *The New York Times* have run articles claiming to debunk Irish slavery as well.[83] If a search term is worded correctly, Google will answer the query itself at the top of the search. There have been thousands of tweets on the social

75. D. Negra, *op. cit.*, p. 1, 6.
76. B. Campbell, J. Manning, art. cit. p. 695.
77. Liam Hogan, "The Myth of Irish Slaves in the Colonies", https://web.archive.org/web/20150202074032/https://www.academia.edu/9475964/The_Myth_of_Irish_Slaves_in_the_Colonies (last accessed 31/10/2018); this article had 10,000 downloads at the time of its removal from academia.edu; please also see Liam Hogan, "Irish Slaves the Convenient Myth" 14 January 2015, https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/liam-hogan/'irish-slaves'-convenient-myth (last accessed 31/10/2018); and also Liam Hogan, "All of my work on the Irish slaves meme," 27 March 2017, https://medium.com/@Limerick1914/all-of-my-work-on-the-irish-slaves-meme-2015-16-4965e445802a (last accessed 9/11/2018).
78. David M. Perry, "No, the Irish Were Not Slaves Too", 15 March 2018, https://psmag.com/social-justice/the-irish-were-not-slaves (last accessed 31/10/2018)
79. Liam Hogan, Laura McAtackney & Matthew Reilly "The unfree Irish in the Caribbean were indentured servants, not slaves", http://www.thejournal.ie/readme/irish–slaves–myth–2369653–Oct2015 (last accessed 1/11/2017). Please also see L. Stack, art. cit.
80. Jerome S. Handler & Matthew Reilly, "Contesting 'White Slavery' in the Caribbean: Enslaved Africans and European Indentured Servants in Seventeenth-Century Barbados", *New West Indian Guide*, 91, 2017, DOI: 10.1163/22134360-09101056.
81. D. Emery, art. cit.
82. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_slaves_myth (last accessed 31/10/2018).
83. Liam Stack, "Debunking a Myth: The Irish Were Not Slaves, Too", 17 March 2017, https://nyti.ms/2m9MGgB (last accessed 31/10/2018).

media platform Twitter concerning the issue which has its own hashtag.[84] There have been petitions from academics attempting to have other internet articles which have taken up the meme either revised or removed.[85] This pushback has been at least partially successful in causing the Global Research website to preface their article's inaccuracies and provide space for a critique.[86] Other high profile websites have either pulled or amended their articles.[87] Unfortunately though, the pushback has often been contradictory or inaccurate in matters such as servants' and slaves' legal status as property, or arguments on the purchases of their bodies or labour.[88]

There are two aspects of these interventions that are worth noting in conclusion. Firstly, folk narratives are a core part of identity. Catherine Eagan noted that attacking or even amending those narratives concerning the Irish and discursive currency triggered defensive aggression.[89] When the emotional connection to long held folk narratives is threatened by attempts to amend those narratives, defensive anger rather than acceptance can be the result.

If an intervention is attempted, strong evidence to the contrary will not only not weaken the internet meme or meme proper: rather in the case of a long held folk or political belief such as the meme, it will strengthen it. This combined with the assertions of at least some of the internet meme connected articles that the true knowledge of Irish slavery is suppressed and that the truth is being obfuscated or withheld by the establishment, amplifies the backfire effect, and makes intervention a risky position, even if the counter evidence is virtually inarguable.

R. F. Foster concluded his 1983 essay on "History and the Irish Question"[90] wondering why revisionists keep having to fight the narrative of an ideal Ireland in folk memory. As Foster put it, professional Irish historiography turned that corner in 1982 and popular Irish history was taking too far long to follow.[91] It is entirely possible that the strength or emotional attachment that Kennedy has identified as the concept of the Most Oppressed People in the World, which in itself strongly shows a nascent political aspect to the Irish identity, in the context of belief perseverance, could explain this inability of the academia in Ireland to overcome this

84. https://twitter.com/hashtag/irishslaves?lang=en (last accessed 31/10/2018).
85. Liam Hogan, "Open letter to Irish Central, Irish Examiner and Scientific American about their "Irish slaves" disinformation", 8 March 2016, https://medium.com/@Limerick1914/open-letter-to-irish-central-irish-examiner-and-scientific-american-about-their-irish-slaves-3f6cf23b8d7f (last accessed 31/10/2018).
86. J. Martin, art. cit.
87. L. Hogan, "Open Letter to Irish Central", art. cit; the articles listed as removed or amended were from the *Irish Examiner* and *Scientific American* respectively.
88. R. Johnson, art. cit., p. 415-16.
89. C. Eagan, art. cit., p. 2; and C. Eagan, *op. cit.*, p. 41
90. R. F. Foster, "History and the Irish Question", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 33, 1983, DOI: 10.2307/3678995, p. 169–192.
91. *Ibid.*

folk memory. Yet this doesn't explain why, despite the existence of discursive research, there are repetitive inaccuracies and contradictions in the discourse concerning the meme among academics.[92]

92. R. Johnson, art. cit., p. 424.