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How White Americans Became Irish: Race, Ethnicity and the Politics of Whiteness

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The origin stories of Irish America have been core narratives within the “making-of-America” discourse of the nation’s founding and development and were especially potent in the cementing, in the mid-twentieth century, of the idea of the US as “a nation of immigrants.” It is an idea that has done significant psychological as well as cultural and political work for white ethnics in the US, glossing important elements of whiteness as a racial formation, mystifying its oppressive qualities and its particularistic claims to identity and values. It has informed the complex ways in which Irish Americans have reconciled their identities in the present with prejudice and discrimination in the past. The story of “how the Irish became white” has been popularly glossed as an ethnic achievement, periodically reclaiming otherness, while eliding the politics of racial power and privilege. Today, as ethnonationalism surges through the mainstream of American politics and culture, unsettling the hegemony of liberal whiteness, Irishness has become a floating signifier of white anger and angst. Perhaps the story we need to tell now is not how the Irish became white but how white folks in the US have become Irish.

When you know suffering, when you know pain, when you have gone through difficulties, when you’ve been through the short end of the power spectrum you understand, you have insight, you have empathy that I think is greater than most people ordinarily have. I really believe that. I believe that is part of what we inherited from our parents.

Joe Biden¹

And the Irish got over it. They don’t run around going “Irish Lives Matter.”

Kimberly Guilfoyle²

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¹ Joe Biden, quoted in Suzanne Lynch, “Joe Biden Says Immigration Key in Emergence of Modern US,” *Irish Times*, 18 Sept. 2018, at www.irishtimes.com/news/world/us/joe-biden-says-immigration-key-in-emergence-of-modern-us-1.3632981 (accessed 14 Aug. 2020).

² Kimberly Guilfoyle, quoted in Scott Eric Kaufman, “Fox News’ Kimberly Guilfoyle Slams ‘Black Lives Matter,’” *Salon*, 18 March 2016, at www.salon.com/2016/03/18/fox_news_kimberly_guilfoyle_you_dont_hear_irish_people_shouting_irish_lives_matter_because_they_get_over_racism (accessed 10 Aug. 2020).

These statements reference differing stories of Irish American history and identity and more particularly what these mean for the present moment of a deeply divided United States. While asserting very different political perspectives these stories share a common mythical root: the story of immigrant hardship, of a downtrodden people fleeing famine, colonial oppression and religious persecution; that the Irish in America suffered historic injustices and trauma in their passage from home country to host and in making a new identity as Americans. The interpretation of the political and moral meanings of that passage sharply diverge, though, and signify a historical bifurcation. On the one hand, there is the progressive story of how the Irish learned from and remembered the injustices they encountered and used this as the lodestone of a liberal politics of empathy. On the other hand, there is the reactionary nationalist story that takes its historical compass from a closed history of immigrant victimization that distinguishes its descendants' Americanness as authentic and earned. Today, these contesting histories are animated and mobilized as reactionary and progressive strands of Irish American culture and politics clash on the grounds of white privilege, immigration and what it means to be American in the era of Trump.

The origin stories of Irish America have been core narratives within the "making-of-America" discourse of the nation's founding and development and were especially potent in the cementing, in the mid-twentieth century, of the idea of the US as "a nation of immigrants" – an idea famously promoted by the Irish American President John F. Kennedy.³ It was an idea widely taken up and channelled through the cultural politics of white ethnicity at a time when ingrained forms of structural racism were under assault by the civil rights movement. It is an idea that has done significant psychological as well as cultural and political work for white ethnics in the US for over half a century, glossing important elements of whiteness as a racial formation, mystifying its oppressive qualities and its particularistic claims to identity and values. Promotion of this ideal reflects and has informed the complex ways in which Irish Americans have reconciled their identities in the present with prejudice and discrimination in the past. The story of "how the Irish became white" has been popularly glossed as an ethnic achievement, periodically reclaiming otherness, while eliding the politics of racial power and privilege.⁴ The story has fresh potency today at a time of renewed crisis in US race

³ In 1958 the Anti-Defamation League published an essay by Kennedy titled "A Nation of Immigrants." In 1963 it was extended and published as a book of the same title. See "JFK and a Nation of Immigrants," JFK Library Foundation, at www.jfklibrary.org/about-us/social-media-apps/jfk35-podcast/season-1-episode-6-jfk-and-a-nation-of-immigrants/transcript (accessed 2 Aug. 2020).

⁴ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

relations, when whiteness is reconstituting itself politically and culturally, and Irish identity has become a marker of this transitioning. As ethnonationalism surges through the mainstream of politics and culture, unsettling the hegemony of liberal whiteness, Irishness becomes a mobile register of white anger and angst. Perhaps the story we need to tell now is not how the Irish became white but how white folks in the US have become Irish.

In setting out to tell this story I am indebted to a generation of scholarship in Irish studies that has advanced understanding of how Irishness allows Americans to negotiate their racial and national status. Most notably and productively, Diane Negra has argued that Irishness in the US draws on a history of racial othering that colours it as an “enriched whiteness,” at once centred and liminal.⁵ Writing in 2006, in the introduction to her edited collection *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*, Negra argues that

Irishness has become a form of discursive currency, motivating and authenticating a variety of heritage narratives and commercial transactions, often through its status as a form of “enriched whiteness” ... Irishness has emerged as an “a la carte ethnicity,” the ideal all-purpose identity credential.⁶

Observing that “Irishness seems to move between a quasi-blackness and a politically insulated ethnic whiteness,” she argues the need to critically analyse and understand the “fraught racial status of Irishness.”⁷ This is a topic that has been taken up within Irish studies scholarship, with attention to both its historical and its transnational dimensions, including focus on “the green Atlantic.”⁸ This essay builds on this scholarship to contemporize our understanding of Irishness as a floating signifier of a racially marked and politicized whiteness at a time when the stakes of such signification have been raised.

This article combines ethnographic research with broader cultural analysis to consider how Irish American identity is taken up in the current (re)politicization of white racial identity in the US, and how it is implicated within broader dynamics of identity politics. We will look at three examples of the ways in which Irishness has been taken up in discourses around race and

⁵ Diane Negra, “The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture,” in Negra, ed., *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1–19, 1. ⁶ *Ibid.*, 1–2. ⁷ *Ibid.*, 3, 14.

⁸ See, for example, Stephanie Rains, *The Irish-American in Popular Culture: 1945–2000* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007); Peter D. O’Neill and David Lloyd, eds., *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-currents of the African and Irish Diasporas* (London: Palgrave, 2009); Lauren Onkey, *Blackness and Transatlantic Irish Identity: Celtic Soul Brothers* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Sinead Moynihan, “Other People’s Diasporas”: *Negotiating Race in Contemporary Irish and Irish American Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013); Natasha Casey, “Converging Identities: Irishness and Whiteness in US Popular Culture,” PhD Dissertation, McGill University, 2014; and Christopher Dowd, *The Irish and the Origins of American Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

immigration: first, narratives of ethnic memory that promote particular perspectives on Irish and Irish America history in relation to current political and cultural issues; second, the myth of Irish slaves in the Americas that has been widely circulated among white nationalist communities since Trump's election and the differing responses to racial-justice protests by Irish and Irish American communities; and last, the claims to Irish identity by young white Americans today. To better understand the cultural and political meanings of Irishness as a particularized form of racial whiteness in the US, we will consider not only national but also transnational conditions of its formation and circulation, and in particular how these interact between Ireland and the US.

THE TWILIGHT OF ETHNICITY

The new mobility of Irishness is congruent with the disappearance of an ethnic habitus, of collective social and material environments conditioning identity.⁹ A significant stage of that disappearance, in the 1970s and 1980s, was studied by numerous ethnographers and sociologists who explored the environments, rituals and networks of Americans of European descent. There has been a steady lessening of empirical scholarly attention to this field since the 1980s, perhaps reflecting a broader assumption that white ethnics are more or less fully "assimilated" due to social mobility, intermarriage and suburbanization.¹⁰ Over the last thirty years there have only been a handful of book-length ethnographic studies of Irish Americans as an ethnic entity. A singular example is Jennifer Nugent Duffy's *Who's Your Paddy? Racial Expectations and the Struggle for Irish American Identity*, published in 2014. It closely examines distinct "Irish cohorts" in Greater New York to delineate and analyse their social practices and in particular how the Irish "are socialized around race and

⁹ Richard Alba advanced the term "the twilight of ethnicity" in his research on Italian Americans in the 1980s. See Richard Alba, "The Twilight of Ethnicity among Americans of European Ancestry: The Case of Italians," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 8, 1 (1985), 134–58.

¹⁰ Throughout the 1980s a series of studies of white ethnic America by and large concluded that there was little left to study. Mary Waters's influential research on suburban third- and later-generation white ethnics, published in her book *Ethnic Options* in 1990, argued that their ethnicity was symbolic, intermittent and selective and had little socioeconomic or political effect on integration in the US. Mary Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Richard Alba, also writing in 1990, found, "The objective decline of ethnicity ... appears undeniable on the face of the evidence." Richard Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). While white ethnicity has continued to draw scholarly attention, it has done so increasingly in a symbolic rather than empirical register, often focussed on what Herbert Gans termed "symbolic ethnicity." Herbert Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2, 1 (1979), 1–20.

become race-conscious subjects in the United States.”¹¹ Duffy’s arguments and analysis gain from her fieldwork within the city of Yonkers, where she observes generational and class differences between settled and new Irish migrants. At the same time, though, focussed on one of the few remaining Irish ethnic enclaves in the US, her study struggles to articulate its significance in terms of a broader Irish American experience and functions as something of an epilogue for a disappearing community.¹² This is not to say that Irish ethnicity is ceasing to exist, rather that it is taking on more overtly symbolic forms. While Irish ethnicity does not principally exist today as a political block or sociological formation, it persists as a realm of cultural and political signification and psychological investment—as “Irishness.” The untethering of Irishness from its ethnic habitus has facilitated its being claimed in multiple contexts to signify diverse forms of identification; it is consumed and performed and suffuses American popular and media cultures.¹³

Writing in 2014, the sociologist Herbert Gans noted the falloff in empirical research on white ethnics in the US and argued the value of studying “late-generation ethnicity” to determine “what patterns and lines, now of decline and disappearance rather than acculturation and assimilation, can be found.”¹⁴ Gans’s approach has promise as a means to identify and decode key elements of what remains of an ethnic habitus, and his view of white ethnicity as a matter of choice informs our understanding of both its relative privilege and mobility as a mode of identity formation. However, his conception of late-generation ethnicity elides broader and deeper vectors of white ethnic identity formation. Studying the “terminality” of white ethnic identity today also requires attention to the pervasiveness and salience of claims to this identity within the socioeconomic, political and cultural environments of national and local identity politics. The sociologists Jason Torkelson and Douglas Hartmann are among the few scholars to have addressed this issue of salience in recent years. Writing in 2010 they used national survey data to seek indicators of white ethnicity as “a socially intelligible boundary claim” and found no determinate relation between racial attitudes and ethnic identity. However, they noted,

While whites’ racial attitudes are unrelated to ethnicity in our data, white ethnicity does appear to be related to the extent to which whites are aware of their racial

¹¹ Jennifer Nugent Duffy, *Who’s Your Paddy? Racial Expectations and the Struggle for Irish American Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 11.

¹² See the review by Mary Kelly, *American Historical Review*, 119, 5 (Dec. 2014), 1739–40.

¹³ See Negra, “The Irish in Us”; Rains; and Moynihan.

¹⁴ Herbert Gans, “The Coming Darkness of Late Generation European American Ethnicity,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37, 5 (2014), 757–65, 763.

identities. Our findings show that white ethnic identification affects racial identity more than non-white ethnicities affect identification with other racial (or pan-ethnic) categories. In other words, ethnic affiliation appears to uniquely influence how whites view their race.¹⁵

Returning to this topic in 2020, with fresh survey material, to examine what they termed “postmillennial white ethnic identification” and assess “how drivers of white ethnic affiliation may have shifted,” they find a marked “retreat from ethnicity” among white Americans but also that “white ethnic affiliation is now most substantively driven by racial ideology, experience, and perceived victimhood.”¹⁶ These are significant findings, indicating that ethnicity can filter or refract racial identity for white Americans and underscore the need to better understand the intersections of race and ethnicity in white identity formation and in particular its politicization.

White ethnicity in the US has long registered (even when it has sublimated) shifts in the racial–political environment, and the move to late-generation ethnicity over the last half-century indicates how whiteness has become more marked and insecure in political terms. With respect to Irish America, a focus on late ethnicity sharpens our understanding of the cultural and political narratives that support it as an identity formation, reminding us that Irishness is at once a relatively privileged narrative of identity in the US today – often signalling personal resilience and tribal success – but also diffuse and conflicted. It also allows us to consider how Irishness encodes both liberal and conservative forms of racialized ethnicity.

“IRISH ON THE INSIDE”

The ethnic revival of the 1970s in the US saw a “rehabilitation of ethnic memory and history as a vital part of personal identity” that also entailed a public and political dimension as America’s immigrant past was celebrated anew and the term “ethnic” shed its alien emphasis.¹⁷ In some large part

¹⁵ Jason Torkelson and Douglas Hartmann, “White Ethnicity in Twenty-First-Century America: Findings from a New National Survey,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33, 8 (2010), 1310–31, 1327.

¹⁶ Jason Torkelson and Douglas Hartmann, “The Racialization of Ethnicity: The New Face of White Ethnicity in Postmillennial America,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 6, 3 (2020), 302–18, 302.

¹⁷ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), 333. On the ethnic revival see Colin Greer, “The Ethnic Question,” in Sohnya Sayres, Anders Stephanson and Fredric Jameson, eds., *The Sixties without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 120–32; Liam Kennedy, “Once Upon a Time in America,” in Kennedy, *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); and Matthew Frye

this ethnic revivalism was a response to the public recognition and legislative gains of African Americans in the period. Writing in 1971, the Irish American sociologist Andrew Greeley acknowledged that the revival was a phenomenon of cultural and sociopolitical capitalization that sought to distinguish white ethnicity in the wake of the civil rights movement. As he pointedly remarked, “What the blacks have done is to legitimate ethnic self-consciousness.”¹⁸ One result of this revivalism was that symbols and narratives emerged which fixed the “ethnic passage” from immigrant to American in the popular imagination as a linear, achieved story. A distinctive feature of this changing conceptualization of ethnic is that it both celebrates and negates cultural pluralism by accommodating ethnic difference within a national ideology of exceptionalism. Just as important, the ethnic/national story is encoded as a white narrative: “coming to America” and “up from poverty” are stories that exclude (have no time or space for) nonwhite minority claims to American identity. It is a narrative that functions to conceal whiteness as a structural feature of the social formation, mystifying oppression, and displacing racial power and privilege. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued, this “‘blameless white identity’ was inadvertently a creation of the left no less than of the right” and the “particularistic romance of the ethnic revival” in the 1970s would feed into both multiculturalism and neoconservatism in the 1980s and beyond.¹⁹ It would also provide cover for what Roderick Ferguson terms the “distributions of whiteness” since the 1990s, which have forestalled rather than enabled socio-economic redistributions and mobilization of structural change.²⁰

The ethnic/national story still has significant cultural and affective power in the US today but its appeal has been loosened by the white heat of conservative attacks on liberal hegemony. President Trump promoted an alternative story of American national identity, one that corresponds settler colonialism with American exceptionalism and discredits the narrative of the nation of immigrants.²¹ In this, the Trump administration’s demonization of (nonwhite) immigrants is key to its efforts to normalize illiberal democracy as reflective of national belonging. As Donald Pease points out, the figure of the immigrant is central to such (re-)formations of the national imaginary:

Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Andrew Greeley, *Why Can’t They Be Like Us? America’s White Ethnic Groups* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), 18. ¹⁹ Jacobson, 241, 245.

²⁰ Roderick A. Ferguson, “The Distributions of Whiteness,” *American Quarterly*, 66, 4 (Dec. 2014), 1101–6.

²¹ In 2018 the US Citizenship and Immigration Services dropped the phrase “nation of immigrants” from its mission statement. See Miriam Jordan, “Is America a ‘Nation of Immigrants’? Immigration Agency Says No,” *New York Times*, 22 Feb. 2018, at www.nytimes.com/2018/02/22/us/uscis-nation-of-immigrants.html (accessed 24 July 2020).

A self-differentiating figure, the immigrant can confirm one of the foundational liberal myths of the United States as a tolerant, welcoming, political asylum for the oppressed; the immigrant can also offer the illiberal settler-colonist state a threatening body upon which it can exert its sovereign nativist force.²²

For Irish Americans the attacks on immigrants and promotion of white nationalism draw attention to their investments in the nation-of-immigrants story which has for several generations sutured Irish American identity to the national narrative. It has often been narrated in tandem with stories of Irish nationalism and anticolonialism, signifying an identity born out of struggle and victimization. However, the identification with a history of struggle against colonization can be embraced and articulated from very different ideological perspectives, informing opposing memories: it can be a source of empathy for those facing struggles as new immigrants in the present, or it can reinforce a blood-and-soil sense of nationalism – it can be inclusive or exclusive, turning it to both liberal and conservative worldviews.

For progressives and liberals, the story has had different political tangents, shaped by class and other identifications across the spectrum from hard-left progressives to liberal centrists. Claims to an Irish left radicalism are less mainstream in the US but have been periodically articulated. In 2001 Tom Hayden, a former leader of the New Left in the 1960s, published a memoir titled *Irish on the Inside: In Search of the Soul of Irish America* that purported to be an alternative history of Irish America, uncovering the “Irish radical past” in the US via his family history and his own political activism in the 1960s. Hayden tells of his ethnic awakening as a form of epiphany, connecting his protesting in Chicago in 1968 with televised scenes of civil rights protests in Northern Ireland:

I was transfixed by the sight of it. Suddenly I realized what had been denied, that these marchers were somehow kin to me, that under the void of my identity I was Irish, and that being Irish need not mean identifying with Cardinal Spellman, “Bull” Connor, Charles Coughlin or Mayor Daley. It could mean being an American rebel not in spite of being Irish, but *because* of being Irish.²³

Hayden’s “discovery” that he was “Irish on the inside” is in line with the ethnic revivalism of the period, though he did more than most to sharpen this with a progressive political vision to the point where he argued that Irish Americans should not claim their Irish roots unless they also claimed

²² Donald E. Pease, “Donald Trump’s Settler-Colonist (Fantasy): A New Era of Illiberal Hegemony?”, in Liam Kennedy, ed., *Trump’s America: Political Culture and National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 23–52, 40–41.

²³ Tom Hayden, *Irish on the Inside: In Search of the Soul of Irish America* (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 101.

the radicalism of those roots.²⁴ Hayden argues for a “new Irish revival” in the US that “means reassessing our racial identification with whiteness” and rejecting the comforts of assimilation.²⁵ Taking his immediate bearings from the peace process in Northern Ireland, where he had been a human rights observer, he asks Irish Americans in the present to identify with and support “the disenfranchised of the earth.”²⁶

Haydn’s charge of bad ethnic faith echoes forward to the present, though it is increasingly articulated in a more defensive fashion against the aggressive nationalist visions of more conservative Irish America. His progressive Irish American vision has become increasingly dimmed in relation to shifting class and race politics and allied cultural warfare. Joan Walsh, a journalist with *The Nation*, provides a pertinent example in her 2012 book *What’s the Problem with White People*. In it she charts growing political divisions in the US through the story of her extended working-class New York Irish Catholic family, many of whom move from Democratic to Republican affiliations across two generations. It is at once a family and political memoir that maps the fears and aspirations of white ethnic Americans onto national discord, from the unravelling of the New Deal coalition and sociopolitical upheavals of the 1960s to rising social inequality and racial tensions in the 2000s. It is also a story of personal frustrations for Walsh, who struggles to square the claims of class and identity politics as a radicalized Irish American.²⁷ More recently, in the wake of Trump’s election, Walsh participated in a coalition of Irish and Irish American politicians, activists and artists under the banner “Irish Stand,” with the aim of “Reminding Irish-America we are an immigrant people.”²⁸ On St Patrick’s Day, 17 March 2017, they organized an event at Riverside Church in Manhattan, advertised as “Irish, American and Global voices raised in unity for justice and equality.” Irish Stand has continued as an active online presence and also organized

²⁴ See Jacobson, 236–40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 324. The Irish American writer and editor Andrew O’Hehir recalls a similar vision: “In its finer moments, the Irish republicanism of the ’70s and ’80s sparked a global consciousness among a population of privileged white Americans whose cultural distinctness was fading fast. You didn’t have to support Angela Davis, Che Guevara and the PLO to understand that there was a historical relationship between their issues and the Irish Troubles.” Andrew O’Hehir, “How Did My Fellow Irish-Americans Get So Disgusting,” *Salon*, 15 March 2014, at www.salon.com/2014/03/15/how_did_irish_americans_get_so_disgusting (accessed 14 July 2020).

²⁷ Joan Walsh, *What’s the Problem with White People: Finding Our Way in the Next America* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012).

²⁸ The organizers included Senator Aodhán Ó Riordáin, a Labour Party politician in Ireland; the Irish dramatist Lisa Tierney-Keogh, an activist associated with the Waking the Feminists movement in Ireland; and Shaun King, an American activist associated with the Black Lives Matter movement.

follow-up events in Ireland, including support for protests in solidarity with Black Lives Matter (see below). However, efforts to organize a similar event in New York in March 2018 fizzled out due to insufficient funding and organizational challenges, though the biggest challenge, not yet overcome, has been to galvanize Irish American communities with radical messaging.

While Hayden's progressive vision of Irishness has not taken significant political hold in Irish America, there has evolved a more mainstreamed liberal Irishness that draws on the immigrant past to buttress narratives of ethnic identity in the present. Throughout his political career, Joe Biden has been one of the most expressive examples of this liberal Irishness, personifying a politics of empathy in which his Irish ancestry and Catholicism function as moral touchstones. As George Blaustein notes, "What is distinctive about [Biden] is not his politics but something more elusive: the chords of grief and mourning that he plays in the culture and that the culture hears in him."²⁹ Biden articulates this clearly both in relation to his personal tragedy (the deaths of family members) and in relation to his Irish Catholic identity – see his quote in the epigraph to this article. In his run for the presidency, Biden promised to be a redemptive figure, healing the wounds of a disunited and fractious nation, and frequently connected his sense of tragedy and suffering with current social crises and traumas:

I know that there are people all across this country who are suffering tonight. Suffering the loss of a loved one to intolerable circumstances, like the Floyd family, or to the virus that is still gripping our nation. Suffering economic hardships, whether due to COVID-19 or entrenched inequalities in our system. And I know that a grief that dark and deep may at times feel too heavy to bear.

I know.³⁰

In his first press conference as President, on 25 March 2021, when asked about the plight of migrants at the US–Mexico border, Biden said,

When my great grandfather got on a coffin ship in the Irish Sea, expectation was: Was he going to live long enough on that ship to get to the United States of America? But they left because of what the Brits had been doing. They were in real, real trouble. They didn't want to leave. But they had no choice.³¹

²⁹ George Blaustein, "The Audacity of Grief," *New Republic*, 16 May 2020, at <https://newrepublic.com/article/153910/joe-biden-audacity-grief> (accessed 3 Aug. 2020).

³⁰ Joe Biden, quoted in Jeet Heer, "Joe Biden's Secret Weapon is Grief," *The Nation*, 12 June 2020, at www.thenation.com/article/politics/biden-secret-weapon-grief (accessed 3 Aug. 2020).

³¹ "Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference," the White House, 25 March 2021, at www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/03/25/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference (accessed 30 March 2021). Biden's appeal for empathy toward emigrants from Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador challenged the political status quo. See John Hudak and Christine Stenglein, "Biden's Immigration Reset," *Brookings*, 19

This promotion of empathy can have powerful political as well as moral appeal but it also elides more structural and material realities of suffering and injustice. In this regard, the Irish element of the Irish Catholic identity does significant ideological and emotional work in disavowing burdens of historical responsibility and guilt. The radical reclamation of an Irish past projected by Hayden is hollowed out in Biden's tellings of his Irishness, producing a deradicalized ethnicity, a benign and redemptive political narrative that bespeaks and promises to restore the hegemony of liberal whiteness.

Biden's Irish liberalism maintains a heroic role for the figure of the immigrant, primarily as a beacon and mirror of liberal tolerance. More conservative Irish in America have taken elements of the same Irish immigrant story of struggle to service a reactionary politics, one that also has a distinctive lineage and is articulated potently as a narrative of grievance in the current culture wars. Conservative Irish attach themselves to a history of oppression in Ireland and ancestral struggle in the US but with no sense that this should entail empathy for the oppressed of the present. Rather, there is a form of transference that has taken place whereby conservative Irish claim victimhood in the present as a means of disowning privilege or guilt. Fintan O'Toole notes, "The centre of gravity of Irish-American politics now gathers around Trump: Mick Mulvaney, Kellyanne Conway, Brett Kavanaugh. A politics of white resentment has drowned out the plaintive wail of common sorrow."³² Writing about how this politics of resentment played out in the Supreme Court confirmation hearings for Kavanaugh in September 2018, O'Toole observes,

The beauty of a specifically Irish Catholicism is that it has victimhood in its DNA. It has a genuine history of suppression and trauma. Even if you're a very privileged white boy going to an elite Jesuit school like Kavanaugh's Georgetown Prep (fees: \$58,000 a year) you can claim ownership of the Great Famine and 800 years of oppression ... we were immigrants, we were victims – and we still are, even when we're in power.³³

Feb. 2021, at www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/02/19/bidens-immigration-reset (accessed 30 Aug. 2021); and Tracy Wilkinson, "Everything You Need to Know about the Northern Triangle and Biden's Immigration Policy," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 June 2021, at www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/02/19/bidens-immigration-reset (accessed 31 Aug. 2021). My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for underlining this point.

³² Fintan O'Toole, "The Designated Mourner," *New York Review of Books*, 16 Jan. 2020, at www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/01/16/joe-biden-designated-mourner (accessed 30 July 2020).

³³ Fintan O'Toole, "Brett Kavanaugh Shows White Irish Catholic Is Now Core of US Reactionary Politics," *Irish Times*, 2 Oct. 2018, at www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-brett-kavanaugh-shows-white-irish-catholic-is-now-core-of-us-reactionary-politics-1.3647806 (accessed 30 July 2020).

The fusion of victimhood and privilege that was latent in the ethnic revivalism of the 1970s is now full-blown across America political culture and mediascapes, manifesting in the politics not of empathy but of resentment and grievance. A prominent gallery of Irish Catholic voices are stoking this cultural politics and calling for a new nationalism, led by what has been called the “alt-Irish” media and political personalities cheerleading for Trump, most volubly, though not exclusively, via Fox News platforms.³⁴ While there are female voices in the gallery, the ground tone and performance are demonstrably male and more particularly a pugnacious Irish masculinity portrayed as “hyper-American.” The journalist Andrew O’Hehir observes, “When you think of the face of white rage in America, it belongs to a red-faced Irish dude on Fox News.”³⁵

Just as memoirs and autobiographical tales have been a key source of left-liberal tellings of the Irish American story, they have also served to narrativize and shape conservative memories of what it means to be Irish, though with very different readings of Irish and Irish American history. A pointed recent example is the memoir published by *National Review* writer Michael Brendan Dougherty, *My Father Left Me Ireland: An American Son’s Search for Home* (2019), which was widely reviewed and lauded in mainstream American media. Dougherty tells his story of growing up with his single mother in the New Jersey suburbs, a young life overshadowed by an absent father in Ireland. The adolescent author disavows his Irishness but then turns to reclaim it following the death of his mother and birth of a daughter. He narrates the book as a series of letters to his father and in doing so embraces Irish nationalist history to fill the void in his identity. The association between fathers and nationalism is clearly the core theme of the memoir and in the closing pages becomes explicitly political as Dougherty turns to contemporary American culture wars. In doing so he criticizes the liberal “baby boomers” whose “myth of liberation ... made my generation into powerless narcissists.”³⁶ In contrast, Dougherty points to the words and deeds of Irish nationalists during the struggle for independence as evidence of an authentic identity that is irreducibly masculine. The lesson for the US is clear: “a nation that is characterized by this fatherlessness, that ignores the real future that is incarnate before us, changes its society in a frightening way.”³⁷ Out of an Irish past rises a story of American futurity, conjoining family, religion and nation in an

³⁴ Siobhán Brett, “Conway, Flynn, O’Reilly, McMahon and More – Introducing the Alt-Irish Americans,” *Independent.ie*, 19 March 2017, at www.independent.ie/world-news/north-america/president-trump/conway-flynn-oreilly-mcmahon-and-more-introducing-the-alt-irish-americans-35539379.html (accessed 25 July 2020).

³⁶ Michael Brendan Dougherty, *My Father Left Me Ireland: An American Son’s Search for Home* (New York: Sentinel, 2019), 219.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

imagined community. It is an appealing vision for mainstream conservatives in the US today, buttressing their emotional support for an aggressive white nationalism to displace the hegemony of liberal whiteness.

THE IRISH SLAVES MYTH

Frederick Douglass visited Ireland for three months in 1845, campaigning and speaking at events across the country, and struck up a relationship with Daniel O’Connell, the Irish champion of the anti-slavery movement. In February 1846 Douglass wrote to William Lloyd Garrison about his experiences in Ireland. He noted that while the “misery and wretchedness of the Irish people” were real and distressing, he remained convinced that reports by the “American press” on this subject were designed to throw “a mantle over the dark and infernal character of American slavery and slaveholders.”³⁸ He goes on:

I believe a large class of writers in America, as well as in this land [Great Britain], are influenced by no higher motive than that of covering up our national sins, to please popular taste, and satisfy popular prejudice; and thus many have harped upon the wrongs of Irishmen, while in truth they care no more about Irishmen, or the wrongs of Irishmen, than they care about the whipped, gagged, and thumb-screwed slave.³⁹

Douglass recognizes the self-serving propaganda at work among those accentuating the distress of the Irish peasantry in Ireland and immigrant Irish in the US, a view promoted by slavery’s apologists at the time. This “covering up” of “national sins” echoes forward to the present day with the widespread promotion of the myth that there were Irish chattel slaves in the North American colonies, positing that seventeenth-century indentured servitude was an extension of the transatlantic slave trade. It is a myth that has been polemically weaponized by online media and memes to stoke the current culture wars and more particularly discourses of white grievance. At the same time, Douglass’s visit to Ireland echoes into the present to remind us of a history of connections and disconnections between Irish and Irish American perspectives on race and radicalism.

The myth of white slavery in the Americas has a long history, beginning with references to the treatment of indentured servants in Barbados in the seventeenth century, and has been used by the far right in the US and the UK throughout the later twentieth century and into the twenty-first to

³⁸ Frederick Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison, 26 Feb. 1846, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, 1842–52*, Series Three, *Correspondence*, ed. John R. McKivigin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 94.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

support white supremacist views. The myth of Irish slavery is also long-standing – the first recorded references to Irish slavery in the North American colonies emerged as part of the southern pro-slavery propaganda of the late eighteenth century – and has received support from Irish nationalists both in Ireland and in the US, albeit mostly as a form of analogy. While neither narrative was supported by scholarship they began to become mainstreamed and conjoined in the twenty-first century, as several texts emerged to claim evidence of Irish slaves, intentionally purporting a false equivalence of chattel slavery and indentured servitude, and these were taken up within online networks.⁴⁰ These claims took root both in the US and in Ireland, at first among white supremacist cohorts but also receiving lip service among Irish Americans who linked them with ethnic memories of anti-Irish bias, often disseminated via family genealogy blogs. Starting in 2008 a number of articles appeared online, often under the heading “Forgotten White Irish Slaves,” and variations of these articles have appeared through to the present day. Certain features recur in the articles; they often appropriate atrocities committed against black slaves by substituting Irish slaves as the victims.⁴¹ The Irish slavery myth has been readily debunked by scholars and online fact checkers both in Ireland and in the US, but this has not halted the online memification.⁴² Liam Hogan, an Irish scholar who has assiduously tracked its paths in social media usage, notes, “The idea has permeated the collective consciousness of the social web to such an extent that few articles on the transatlantic slave trade or racism now slip by without someone introducing ‘white Irish slaves’ into the comments section.”⁴³

The Irish slavery meme has become increasingly visible since 2013, stimulated in part by the rise of Black Lives Matter. The trajectory of the meme has paralleled the intensification of protests around racial injustice in the US, and contemporary events and discourses have become features of its production and consumption. The online backlash to Black Lives Matter

⁴⁰ The Irish slavery myth appears to have taken more popular hold following the publication in 2000 of Sean O’Callaghan, *To Hell or Barbados: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ireland* (Dublin: O’Brien Press, 2000). A work of popular history rather than scholarship, the book claims there were “50,000 men, women and children transported to Barbados and Virginia” as “Irish slaves” in the seventeenth century.

⁴¹ Liam Hogan, “Two Years of the ‘Irish Slaves’ Myth: Racism, Reductionism and the Tradition of Diminishing the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Open Democracy*, 7 Nov. 2016, at www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/two-years-of-irish-slaves-myth-racism-reductionism-and-tradition-of-diminis (accessed 22 July 2020).

⁴² In 2016, 82 scholars signed an open letter debunking the myth and asking publications to stop repeating it. “Open Letter to Irish Central, Irish Examiner and Scientific American about Their ‘Irish Slaves’ Disinformation,” 8 March 2016, at <https://limerick1914.medium.com/open-letter-to-irish-central-irish-examiner-and-scientific-american-about-their-irish-slaves-3f6cf23b8d7f#tb66klcft> (accessed 3 March 2021).

⁴³ Hogan.

frequently referenced the Irish slaves meme and also promoted the claim that “Irish Lives Matter” – a statement quickly commodified on T-shirts for sale on many online sites, while a Facebook group has used the same logo. This became a widespread repudiation of the legacies of racism in the US that moved from the margins of alt-right sites to mainstream media, effectively normalizing such views. In this, the promotion of the slaves meme is congruent with a broader take-up of Irish mythology and iconography by alt-right communities. Natasha Casey has described white supremacist and nationalist groups as “deviant consumers of Irishness” and argues that they have “used the mainstream fascination with Irishness to appeal to wider and more general white audiences and boost their membership.”⁴⁴ The common drive and theme is a disavowal of racism under the guise of Irishness – a sentiment echoed in the statement by Fox News host Kimberley Guilfoyle, “The Irish got over it” (see the epigraph above).

In Ireland, since 2016, there has been increasing online discussion of the myth, spiking in relation to its discussion on American websites, and especially intense in the summer of 2020. The predominant narrative in the discussions has been aimed at debunking the myth and calling out its proponents as apologists for slavery and white supremacy.⁴⁵ That pushback against the myth has been more fulsome in Ireland than in the US is not surprising given the relative investments in Irish history, but it also points up significant differences between Irish and Irish American perspectives on matters of race and racism. In Ireland, discussions and understanding of the transatlantic slave trade, of Irish relations with African Americans in the US, and of race and racism in Ireland are all significantly shaped by a violent history of colonialism and its troubled legacies. That Irish peoples have recognized a shared history of oppressions with African Americans (and other marginalized groups) is hardly surprising and this can energize political activism. However, it is an identification that often misrecognizes the particularities of racial power and domination. In some large part due to a postcolonial perspective, Irish identity formation has long worked to analogize experiences of Irish and African American oppressions, making a trope of romantic racialism in popular and political cultures. Such imagined othering of Irish identity elides some of the harsher realities of the connections between peoples of Irish and African American descent in the past and today. It also runs counter to Irish

⁴⁴ Casey, “Converging Identities,” 17–18. Casey notes that this phenomenon has drawn little scholarly attention and makes a strong case for critically expanding analysis of “the connection between Irishness and whiteness” to such “deviant” terrains. *Ibid.*, 95–96.

⁴⁵ Brian Kelly, “Ireland and Slavery: Debating the Irish Slaves Myth,” *Counterpunch*, 6 Aug. 2020, at www.counterpunch.org/2020/08/06/ireland-and-slavery-debating-the-irish-slaves-myth (accessed 24 Aug. 2020).

American perspectives on such connections. Whereas in Ireland an analogization of oppressions is common, Irish America has also romanticized a history of oppression but more often than not to separate itself from African Americans.⁴⁶ This disconnection between Ireland and Irish America is further exacerbated by the growing disillusionment in Ireland with the US, particularly in relation to the Trump administration, with widely expressed concerns about the illiberal nature of its domestic and foreign policies. Recent responses in Ireland to the protests in the US reflect this disillusionment but also signal the racial contours of contemporary Irish self-conception as Ireland comes to terms with matters of immigration.

The international momentum of Black Lives Matter has disturbed some of the complacencies and assumptions in Ireland around race and racism. When there were protests in cities across the world in June 2020 in solidarity with those in the US sparked by the death of George Floyd, surprisingly large numbers of people marched in Ireland, particularly in Dublin. As elsewhere, the demonstrations not only expressed solidarity with American campaigners but also denounced racism in domestic contexts. Unlike many other instances of such protests outside the US, those in Ireland were not aimed primarily at racist policing. Ireland does not have a large black population and there have not been the spectacular examples of violent racist policing that have been flashpoints in other countries for rallies and for identifications with Black Lives Matter. In place of such discourses, a local topic in speeches and on placards in the Irish protests was Direct Provision, the name given to the state's reception system of accommodating asylum seekers, based in residential institutions across Ireland that are mostly privately owned and run for profit. Ensuring long periods of isolation and limbo for its subjects, the Direct Provision system has been strongly criticized, both domestically and internationally, as "a severe violation of human rights."⁴⁷ The symbolic grafting of Black Lives Matter onto protests against Ireland's treatment of asylum seekers has been questioned by some but it has a logic: it underscores that the migrant crisis is a racial crisis.⁴⁸ The protests in Ireland have opened an

⁴⁶ See Moynihan, "Other People's Diasporas"; and Onkey, *Blackness and Transatlantic Irish Identity*.

⁴⁷ In the words of Masha Gessen, writing in the *New Yorker*, Ireland "has created a system that is perhaps unique in its daily cruelty"; people in the system "are living out of time and out of space: they have left their home but they have not landed anywhere." Masha Gessen, "Ireland's Strange, Cruel System for Asylum Seekers," *New Yorker*, 4 June 2019, at www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/irelands-strange-cruel-system-for-asylum-seekers (accessed 4 Aug. 2020).

⁴⁸ In doing so, it adopts an understanding of racism, following scholar-activist Ruth Gilmore, as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death." So understood, the Direct Provision system in Ireland

aperture onto submerged questions of race and racism in the country, triggering public conversations concerning racial attitudes.⁴⁹

There is a history of networked radicalism between Ireland and the US, particularly in relation to matters of Irish republicanism but also in the terrain of race and civil rights, as indicated by Frederick Douglass's activities in Ireland in 1845. In the later 1960s, the emergent civil rights organizations in Northern Ireland took up the slogans and songs of the civil rights movement in the US. Demands for an end to discrimination against Northern Irish Catholics in housing, education and political representation took inspiration from Martin Luther King's protest playbook, and there was outreach between Irish and African American civil rights actors.⁵⁰ Echoes of that historical solidarity also play out today in Irish organizations' support of the Black Lives Matter movement. In February 2015, Black Lives Matter cofounder Patrisse Cullors was a speaker at the Bloody Sunday March for Justice in Derry, in Northern Ireland, while the famous "Free Derry" wall mural was amended to show three figures representing "Derry," "Palestine" and "Ferguson" – the last a reference to the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer in the city of Ferguson in Missouri in August 2014.⁵¹ In an open letter by Irish people and Irish Americans expressing solidarity with Black Lives Matter, posted online in May 2015, the authors state,

We the undersigned Irish people stand for the human rights of Black people in Baltimore and across the U.S.

... In writing this statement we make no claims to a particularly strong tradition of Irish solidarity with Black people, but it is written with the recognition that our histories and our freedoms are forever entwined by the events of the past 500 years.⁵²

functions precisely as a racist system. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 28.

⁴⁹ See "The Irish Times View on Racism in Ireland: A Virulent Strain," *Irish Times*, 5 June 2020, at www.irishtimes.com/opinion/editorial/the-irish-times-view-on-racism-in-ireland-a-virulent-strain-1.4271970 (accessed 18 June 2020); Patrick Freyne, "People of Colour in Ireland Need Allies 'Not Bystanders'," *Irish Times*, 18 June 2020, at www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/people-of-colour-in-ireland-need-allies-not-bystanders-1.4281610 (accessed 20 June 2020); and Alistair MacDonald and Paul Hannon, "In Ireland, Protests Spur Push for Hate Crime Laws," *Wall Street Journal*, 22 July 2020, at www.wsj.com/articles/in-ireland-domestic-racism-and-u-s-protests-spur-push-on-hate-crime-laws-amid-vacuum-11595434857 (accessed 30 July 2020).

⁵⁰ See Brian Dooley, *Black and Green: The Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland and Black America* (London: Pluto Press, 1998).

⁵¹ See "Bloody Sunday," YouTube, 30 Jan. 2015, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3-qqk5CqwU (accessed 22 Aug. 2020).

⁵² "Irish Statement in Support of #blacklivesmatter," *Indymedia.ie*, 5 June 2015, at www.indymedia.ie/article/105428?save_prefs=true (accessed 24 Aug. 2020).

The authors also lamented what they perceived as the lack of support in Irish America for antiracist politics and protests:

To date, the silence of Irish-American organizations on the epidemic of anti-black police brutality is deafening. We reiterate Daniel O’Connell’s question to the Irish in the U.S. more than 170 years ago: “How can the generous, the charitable, the humane, the noble emotions of the Irish heart, have become extinct among you?”

We believe the time is now for Irish people to live up to their values and history ...⁵³

The “silence of Irish-American organizations” is historical, as the statement notes with the reference to O’Connell, who tried and failed to engage the Irish in the US in promotion of an anti-slavery position. It also has historical echoes in relation to the transatlantic civil rights connections of the 1960s when the alliance between Northern Irish and African American activists alienated elements of Irish America, including many who otherwise purported to be Irish nationalists.⁵⁴

Very recently in the US there have been efforts advanced to break this long cycle of silence. In the wake of protests in the summer of 2020, Irish American organizations were stirred to voice support for Black Lives Matter and there has also been Irish American push-back against the promotion of “Irish Lives Matter” memes and merchandising. A notable statement in this regard is a public letter signed by sixty Irish American political and cultural figures, sent to Representative Karen Bass, the head of the Congressional Black Caucus, following the death of the civil rights leader John Lewis. The letter outlines the influence of the American civil rights movement in the formation of the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association in the 1960s, and the inspiration of Martin Luther King on leaders of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland. It states,

Irish America still has much to learn about the depths of discrimination faced by our African American brothers and sisters. And we have our own history of racial prejudice that we must examine and acknowledge.

We urge the great institutions of Irish America, particularly our colleges and universities, as well as our civic and fraternal organizations to address their role in maintaining the institutional racism that has plagued this nation.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See Bob Purdie, “Oppressive Solidarity: The Northern Irish Civil Rights Movement and Irish America,” *Irish Studies Review*, 1, 2 (1992), 6–8.

⁵⁵ “An Irish American Response to the Death of Cong. John Lewis and the BLM Movement,” 29 July 2020, *Green and Black in America Together*, at <https://greenandblacktogether.com/the-letter-2> (accessed 26 Aug. 2020).

The letter goes on to denounce the “wrongheaded, commercial decision by Amazon, Walmart and other retailers to sell ‘Irish Lives Matters’ tee shirts ... We urge Irish-Americans to boycott these sales.”⁵⁶ The letter concludes that “Irish America cannot remain comfortably on the sidelines as America seeks to finally put an end to the racial discrimination that has haunted our country.”⁵⁷ These are tentative but symbolic steps by what might be viewed as the Irish American establishment, or at least its more liberal wing. Whether it signals a fulsome review of Irish America’s investments in institutional racism in the US, past and present, is too early to determine, but it seems unlikely. The reference to Irish America residing “comfortably on the sidelines” glosses the realities and costs of those investments. This is not to gainsay the intentions and efforts of Irish Americans to promote antiracist actions and solidarities, but there is little evidence that the mainstream of Irish America supports a reckoning with racial injustice in the US. Those that do yet need to forge a compelling political messaging and agenda that move beyond chastising Irish Americans for their bad faith and failure “to live up to their values and history.” While such calls can illuminate hypocrisies in claims to Irishness, they are an insufficient politics, dissolving into a “sentimental lament” that falls far short of dismantling the racial formations that secure Irish privilege.⁵⁸

“NOT ANOTHER WHITE AMERICAN”

The heightened political temperature around matters of race and immigration was both context and substance of the field research undertaken by the author in 2019 and 2020, focussed on the perspectives of “young people (18–30 years old) of Irish heritage” in the US.⁵⁹ An online survey aligned with the research reflected the aging of Irish America, with 67 percent of respondents third-generation or older and only 3 percent born in Ireland. The younger generation of Americans of Irish descent that were studied are “late-generation” in historical terms and their Irish identity is somewhat attenuated as a result but also due to

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See David Lloyd, “Black Irish, Irish Whiteness and Atlantic State Formation,” in O’Neill and Lloyd, *The Black and Green Atlantic*, 3–19, 18.

⁵⁹ The research focussed on young people (18–30 years old) who are Irish-identifying in the US. The project was initiated in January 2019 and the primary research completed in October 2019, with secondary research continuing until March 2020. The primary aim of the research project was to advance analysis of the identity formations of Americans claiming Irish descent. It involved primary data gathering via an online survey and interviews in the field with individuals and focus groups in the New York tristate area. In all, 781 survey responses were submitted and 41 interviews recorded and transcribed. Portions of this research were supported by funding from the Government of Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs, via its Emigrant Support Programme.

the inevitable and complex patterns of dispersal and intermarriage across the generations, reshaping their sense of ethnic identity. The late generations' distance from Ireland is not only temporal but also spatial – over 50 percent of those surveyed have not been to Ireland – and yet 37 percent identify as Irish American, and another 24 percent identify as “Irish and another ethnicity.” These figures both underline the constancy of an Irish identity through the generations and also signify its symbolic nature. Young Americans do not need to have any material ties with or to have visited Ireland in order to claim an Irish identity and for many Irishness is only one of many vectors or facets of identity. On the one hand, they have multiple ethnicities, ancestries, stories of origin and ethnic connections that can lay some claim to their contemporary sense of identity. On the other hand, Irishness is rarely lived as an everyday, communal or collective identity for these later generations, nor does it have an urgent claim on them as an identity under pressure or in peril. Rather, it is an identity of choice, though that term can mask less conscious drives in the formation of identity.⁶⁰

The survey and interviews were sensitive to the ephemerality of late-generation ethnicity and approached matters of identity via questions that explored the contexts, triggers and conduits of identity formation and performance. The underlying question, occasionally asked bluntly in interviews, was “Why do you choose to be Irish?”, which often elicited reflective, sometimes elliptical, comments.

When it comes to my identity, I don't really know if I've ever felt that things were permanent. I kind of always feel like I'm always in a state of fluctuation ... I look forward to setting roots somewhere and really investing in a community.

For me identity isn't something you can choose on a whim. It's something that you can I guess sort of accept. Accept your role in it, plot your place on the chart.

I haven't arrived to what Irishness means to me ... Like what does it mean in the feelings I can't express in words? It's not, I don't know. I haven't reached the place there.⁶¹

Such articulations express both the ephemerality and the potency of Irish identifications. Many interviewees told stories of growing up in terms of their memories of what it was in their childhoods that signified an Irish identity,

⁶⁰ Marcus Lee Hansen's insight on “the problem of the third generation immigrant,” first delivered in 1937, remains relevant: “What the son wished to forget the grandson wishes to remember.” See Peter Kivisto and Dag Blanck, eds., *American Immigrants and Their Generations: Studies and Commentaries on the Hansen Thesis after Fifty Years* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

⁶¹ All quotations are from interviews conducted by the author: 4 April 2019, New York City; 8 April 2019, Fairfield, CT; 11 April 2019, New York City.

while just as many indicated that in adolescence and/or early adulthood, often as students, they were in search of a stronger or alternative sense of identity, and Irishness offered this. What Ireland or Irishness might represent in that search was not always clear, though there were indications that it offers forms of security and difference in expressions of class and race precarity. Connotations of family and community are at the core of these young peoples' perception of Ireland, and there are strong aesthetic and emotional tropes in the perceptions (somewhat idealized and gesturing towards stereotype) suggesting that Ireland represents an alternative realm of social connectedness to that experienced by young Irish in the US today.

In our surveys and interviews, we included questions and developed conversations on sociopolitical perspectives. Asked about political preferences in the survey the responses revealed strong trends towards Democrat/liberal. Several survey questions asked for views on domestic politics and respondents' political perspectives – the great majority proved to be progressive in their views, with 69 percent registering as either “leaning liberal,” “liberal” or “very liberal.” Similar perspectives emerged in relation to questions about immigration. In interviews there were many comments on the topic, with reference both to the history of Irish arrival and settlement in the US, and to the present political turmoil around matters of immigration. For many, there was a clear correspondence between being Irish and viewing the US as a welcoming nation of immigrants. In relation to this, several interviewees made explicit reference to what they perceived (negatively) as a growing conservatism in older generations of Irish America. One observed that Irish Americans “have forgotten their history ... of oppression,” and another commented that “people in America use the historical plight of Irish America to say Irish people are oppressed too.”⁶²

Such views suggest that the pronounced political tensions in the US in recent years have impacted on how Americans articulate their Irish identity, calibrating it in relation to broader concerns. In this context, for younger Irish Americans in particular, a progressive sensibility seems to accentuate their self-consciousness about Irish identity, sometimes leading to tensions, but only rarely to disavowal; rather, a synthesis is often expressed, a recombinant identification that fuses disparate social and political values and perspectives. That calibration of Irish identity in relation to broader concerns also referenced race consciousness. In interviews, several spoke about how Irishness offered a sense of identity that differentiated their whiteness – often this was in response to the question “Why do you choose to be Irish?”

⁶² All quotations are from interviews conducted by the author: 5 April 2019, New York City; 21 June 2019, New York City.

I think at a certain point, it does get to become a choice because you have assimilated into the United States and now are considered white. And so you don't really have to identify that way if you don't want to.

I think that people are feeling that they don't want to be lumped into this generic form of white. I could see that as a result of that, people might reach out to reconnect with their heritage ... I am not interested in having no culture and having no attachment to an identity according to my heritage. I don't want the cliched American white identity.

Choosing Ireland ... means that you are not another white American ... it makes you interesting.⁶³

These last comments underscore the complex intersectionality of ethnicity and race in Irish American identity, wherein ethnicity encodes particular connotations of whiteness, differentiating it and making it salient. Choosing to be Irish is not necessarily a conscious choice (though it is clearly articulated as such above), but it invariably triggers or entails race consciousness.

The common expressions of choosing an Irish identity to address a perceived lack of identity, of "having no culture," echo Tom Hayden's claim that "[a]ssimilation led to emptiness" and his discovery that he was "Irish on the inside." However, the view that "choosing Ireland ... makes you interesting" sounds more like a neoliberal lifestyle choice than a commitment to the radical tradition of Irishness that Hayden imagines and embraces. To be sure, what it means to be "Irish on the inside" for young Americans today is varied and conflicted, reflecting their "late-generation" status and the more generalized precarity of their generation. For many of the young progressive Irish who were interviewed, Irishness affords a history of oppression that demands an empathetic political perspective in the present, yet this progressive claiming of Irishness also remystifies white privilege as choice. That choice, however conscious, represents a self-regarding particularity that reflects the hegemonic distributions of whiteness.

In eras of charged political flux, white ethnic identity politics can be triggered, as was the case in the 1970s with the "ethnic revival" that was a significant feature of the conservative counterrevolution in that period. Today, in another period of political volatility and heightened identity politics, white racial identity has become more markedly salient and politically relevant. It may be that white ethnicity plays a role in supplementing this shift, not as a collective or communal political or sociological entity but rather as a symbolic force, as a floating signifier of a differentiated whiteness. Today, as in the 1970s, the US is undergoing significant realignments of white hegemony,

⁶³ All quotations are from interviews conducted by the author: 12 April 2019, New York City; 12 April 2019, New York City; 18 June 2019, New York City.

with nationalist and liberal formations clashing across the political spectrum, roiled by Trump's promotion of illiberal democracy. In the 1970s, the ethnic revival legitimized ethnicity and promoted particularism in service of a "blameless white identity." Today, white ethnicity, as evidenced by the Irish example, is relatively more sublimated and deracinated, yet also more mobile and productive. Its particularism functions as a cultural marker in this transitioning of racial politics, signifying the confluences and tensions between ethnicity and race in white identity. We can see this being loudly played out in the hyper-Irishness of politicians and pundits (especially, though not exclusively, conservatives) but it is being more quietly played out in the identifications, the choices, of young people, who do not want to be "another white American."

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