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Crossing the Atlantic: The myth of Irish slave ships

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the problematic nature of comparing the suffering of enslaved African people and Irish immigrants in the seventeenth century as a way to de-legitimise critical race theory, and to deconstruct this tenuous comparison through examples using transatlantic ships.

During the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland in the seventeenth century, thousands of Irish people willingly entered indentured servitude for periods of up to seven years in return for passage to the New World (Beckles, 1990, p. 504). Alongside these people, political prisoners and other people deemed undesirable to the British crown were forced into servitude. Irish servants were to work in exchange for their freedom, transport, and compensation such as property or money — which would be received upon completion. It has been documented that these agreements often involved some form of swindling and promise of better life, but the people who entered these harsh agreements did so of their own free will (Bennet, 2020, 67-68). "Merchants believed the Irish poor were more willing to seek opportunities in the West Indies than their English, Scottish, or Welsh counterparts, owing to frequent food shortages, high unemployment, and English military disruption in Ireland. Consequently, they looked to Ireland for a ready supply of servants." (Beckles, 1990, p. 504). The hope of a better life drove many to leave.

Irish agricultural workers and peasants who were fleeing Cromwell's military persecution of Irish Catholics signed agreements with English merchants, who then loaded them onto cargo ships and took them from Ireland with little knowledge of their destination so they could be sold to plantation owners. Dunn studied the accounts of hundreds of sick people jammed together in the darkness below deck in cold weather, with multiple people being thrown overboard each day — one account recalling the death of eighty passengers on a single voyage (Dunn, 1972, p. 1638). Death, disease and suffering were rampant in the hold of the cargo ships. As soon as these people entered the ship their tenure as servants began and their lower position in society was solidified.

Both indentured servants and slaves lived under colonial rule and oppression, but this narrative of long suffering and violence has spiralled in more recent times. With the notion of white slaves becoming a new point raised against critical race theory and to promote racist narratives. In recent years this false narrative of white Irish slaves has built some momentum amongst Irish diaspora groups online — with much of this appearing on Alt-right Facebook

pages, particularly in the form of memes (Amend, 2016). The free will and impermanence of the status of indentured workers makes this comparison highly problematic.

One particularly problematic myth which has developed is a story which closely resembles that of the Zong massacre, with academics such as Liam Hogan labelling the history of this false narrative as “wilful ignorance” (2015a). The case of the Zong is infamous, in which the owners of the ship tried to claim insurance compensation for the enslaved people thrown overboard after a storm because of food shortages (Krikler, 2007, p. 30). This narrative has essentially been edited to include the falsehood that the slaves thrown overboard were white and Irish (fig.1). Hogan also states that “This refusal to differentiate between indentured servitude and racialised perpetual hereditary chattel slavery via the transatlantic slave trade, only feeds white supremacist myths.” (Hogan, 2015a). The spatiality of the ship and the “language of violence in the hold” which Sharpe so poetically describes has been co-opted to perpetuate racist myths (Sharpe, 2016 , p. 69). The ship and the violence it contains are central to the narrative — the boat’s architecture acting as the setting for a narrative to perpetuate sympathy for these fictitious white slaves.



Fig.1. Example of an “Irish slaves” meme on social media that co-opts the Zong Massacre (Hogan, 2015a).

A similar narrative fabrication of white slave ships is present in the highly problematic *To hell or Barbados* by Sean O’Callaghan, in which he claims that “These were the same ships that were used to transport black slaves from the West Coast of Africa to the West Indies. The merchants simply switched to the Irish slave

trade at a considerable profit to themselves, following a long line of slave merchants who made fortunes from buying slaves in the African market and selling them in Barbados and the colonies of America.” (O’Callaghan, 2000, p.80). There is little or no evidence to substantiate this claim. Documentation does exist however, showing that servants were generally taken on ships alongside cargo such as tobacco. According to the documents analysed by Bennet, these servants were considered the most valuable piece of cargo on board, but they still retained the status of people (Bennet, 2020, 67-68). Accounts of overcrowding, disease, death and suffering on both types of cargo ships are common, but the systematic and architectural oppression

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