

Irish Whiteness and the Nineteenth-Century Construction of Race

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IN “Hating Victorian Studies Properly,” Nasser Mufti posits that “the field lacks a theory of—or even a debate about—race in the nineteenth century.”¹ One of the areas in which that is not wholly true is Irish studies, where significant postcolonial scholarship has interrogated the nineteenth-century construction of racialized Irishness, often in relation to nonwhiteness. “Given the amount of prejudice in England and Scotland against the Irish in general and Irish immigrant workers in particular,” argues L. Perry Curtis Jr., “it is hardly surprising that Celtic Irishmen should have found themselves occupying a branch which was closer in some respects to the Negro limb than to the Anglo-Saxon crown of [the] tree.”² Patrick Brantlinger is more explicit: “The idea of the Irish as ‘the n[—]s of Europe’. . . goes back at least to the 1830s.”³ Michael de Nie deplores “historians who have difficulty appreciating that ‘race’ was popularly understood and used by Victorians to explain cultural as much as biological differences” and “others who refuse to believe that the Irish received treatment any different from that of other marginalized groups.”⁴ Much similar work has followed Noel Ignatiev’s influential assertion that the nineteenth-century Irish “became white” upon their immigration to the United States, whereas they ostensibly had not been in the United Kingdom: “To become white,” Ignatiev contends, “they had to learn to subordinate county, religious, or national animosities . . . to a new solidarity based on color—a bond which, it must be remembered, was contradicted by their experience in Ireland.”⁵

It is important to critique the historical construction of whiteness, if only to disrupt its status as an uninterrogated norm. Yet the claim that Irish Americans “became white” raises a significantly underexamined

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conceptual challenge, as David Lloyd has astutely observed: “Since even emancipation failed to allow the former slaves to escape the taint of blackness and become fully fledged citizens, this explanation clearly begs the question of how such a crossing of the ethnic/racial line would have been possible if the Irish were not already to some degree regarded as white.”⁶ For Lloyd, what has frequently been described as a historical transit of Irishness into whiteness in the United States depends upon both the flexibility of whiteness to accommodate and reshape itself around Irishness and the amenability of Irishness to be understood as white from the start—in a way that persons of African descent could not be so understood. At least an incipient Irish whiteness must precede, rather than arise out of, the historical developments that Ignatiev details.

It is true that the relationship of racialization to legal status manifested differently in the United Kingdom than in the United States. For one thing, American citizenship was explicitly—and increasingly—the province of whiteness in the early decades of the nineteenth century,⁷ while British enfranchisement was not necessarily grounded in race: the formerly enslaved Ignatius Sancho, as a male property owner in London, voted in parliamentary elections as early as 1774 and 1780.⁸ As Amy E. Martin has convincingly explained, mid-nineteenth-century racial epistemology situated Irishness “at the intersection of two contemporaneous racial formations—one relying on an epidermal logic of whiteness emerging primarily in North America and the other founded on a more fluid understanding of racial hierarchy that justified the British Empire.”⁹ Recognizing this multiplicity of racial epistemologies is critical. Yet despite the suggestions of some postcolonial scholarship, the construction of Irishness as whiteness was not limited to the American side of the Atlantic, nor was the notion of Irishness as a peculiar test case of that whiteness exclusive to the British Isles. In fact, an emphasis on the mobilization of racialized tropes for the depiction of Irish poverty and politics can distract us from an important truth: in nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland as well as the United States, “Celticness” was not in any serious or widespread way understood (or treated) as equivalent to Blackness, although—as I will show—that did not stop some nineteenth-century Irish advocates from drawing that misleading analogy or even arguing that Irish political and cultural disadvantage surpassed the brutality enacted against enslaved Black people in the West Indies or the United States.

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Geraldine Heng has rightly described a “long history of race,” as our term “race” itself “is attached to a repeating tendency . . . to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups.”¹⁰ Within that long history, though, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the development of the racial categories (what Sebastian Lecourt calls “organically unique groups—sometimes called nations, sometimes *Völker*, and increasingly *Rasse* or races”) ¹¹ that continue to shape our modern world, along with an apparatus of putatively scientific theories that both articulated and enforced those categories. Focusing in particular on Britain, Roxann Wheeler demonstrates that “throughout the eighteenth century older conceptions of Christianity, civility, and rank were *more explicitly* important to Britons’ assessment of themselves and other people than physical attributes such as skin color, shape of the nose, or texture of the hair”; she relates that “the assurance that skin color was the primary signifier of human difference was not a dominant conception until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and even then individuals responded variously to nonwhite skin color.”¹² Indeed, Irene Tucker has theorized, “the history of modern race”—instantiated by “the notion that racial identity might be instantly discerned by noting the color of an individual’s skin”—is “intimately bound up with the emergence of modern ‘anatomical’ medicine” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹³

An oft-cited Victorian exponent of this developing “race science” is the Edinburgh anatomist Robert Knox, who argued in the introduction to *The Races of Men* (1850) that although “the word, *race*, is of daily use, applied even to man[,] . . . I use it in a new sense.” Rather than understanding race as contingent upon what he called “fanciful causes, such as education, religion, climate, &c.,” he insisted “that race is everything in human history; that the races of men are not the result of accident; that they are not convertible into each other by any contrivance whatever.”¹⁴ Knox’s “race,” that is, seems to be biological and stable, rather than cultural and contingent.¹⁵ And Knox presents his racialist account as an explicit debunking of arguments for broader categories of whiteness comprising persons of European descent in general:

When the word race, as applied to man, is spoken of, the English mind wanders immediately to distant countries; to Negroes and Hottentots, Red Indians and savages. . . . But the object of this work is to show that the

European races, so called, differ from each other as widely as the Negro does from the Bushman; the Caffre from the Hottentot; the Red Indian of America from the Esquimaux; the Esquimaux from the Basque. (39)

The Irish were by no means exempt from the rise of this putatively scientific racism. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has related, “Negative assessments of Irishism or Celtism as a fixed set of inherited traits . . . became linked at mid-century to a fixed set of observable physical characteristics, such as skin and hair color, facial type, and physique.”¹⁶ Knox was among the foremost polemicists contending that the “Celtic” Irish were fundamentally different in race from the English “Saxon”: “700 years of absolute possession has not advanced by a single step the amalgamation of the Irish Celt with the Saxon-English. . . . If you seek an explanation, go back to France; go back to Ireland, and you will find it there: it is the race” (21). Knox continues, explicitly denying any role to geographical or cultural environment in the production of race: “the Anglo-Saxon in America is a Saxon, and not a *native*: the Celt will prove a Celt wherever he is born, wherever he is found. The possible conversion of one race into another I hold to be a statement contradicted by all history” (22). Of what he insists is always the “failed” result of “intermarriage,” he claims, “with Celt and Saxon it is the same as with Hottentot and Saxon, Caffre and Hottentot” (66).

As Knox’s language here suggests, some Victorian theorists of race did in fact posit parallels between Irishness and Blackness. The ethnologist John Beddoe, for example, in the 1880s developed an “Index of Nigrescence,” what he designated “a ready means of comparing the colours of two peoples or localities.”¹⁷ Describing “prognathism” (the protrusion of the jaws), he asserted that “while Ireland is apparently its present centre, most of its lineaments are such as lead us to think of Africa as its possible birthplace; and it may be well, provisionally, to call it Africanoid.”¹⁸ And, Brantlinger notes, “Though of the same [Celtic] race[,] . . . the French, according to Knox, are very different from the Irish. The French are close to the pinnacle, whereas the Irish are the lowest dregs of civilization and seem fated to go the way of the dark races of the world.”¹⁹ (That fact itself, of course, undermines the thesis that “race” is the fundamental unit of human difference, if the racial category in this case is “the Celt,” given that, for Knox, it includes both the Irish and the French.)

Perhaps the most notorious nineteenth-century rhetorical association of the Irish with people of African descent is Thomas Carlyle’s, in

his belligerently racist “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” (1849), which he wrote just after his return from Famine-era Ireland. In this essay, published anonymously under the fictional editorship of the suggestively Irish “Dr. Phelim M’Quirk,” Carlyle juxtaposes enslaved West Indians with the Irish:

If the Africans that are already there could be made to lay down their pumpkins and labour for their living, there are already Africans enough. . . . To bring in new and ever new Africans, say you, till pumpkins themselves grow dear; till the country is crowded with Africans; and black men there, like white men here, are forced by hunger to labour for their living? That will be a consummation. To have “emancipated” the West Indies into a *Black Ireland*; “free” indeed, but an Ireland, and black!²⁰

Famine-era Ireland, “sluttishly starving from age to age on its act-of-parliament ‘freedom,’”²¹ offers Carlyle a model for his vision of enslaved Africans in the West Indies, represented as a people with no energy for work but only for complaint.²² “Alas, look at that group of *unsold, unbought, unmarketable Irish ‘free’ citizens, dying there in the ditch,*” Carlyle sneers, suggesting that the fact that the Irish are not enslaved makes no difference to their (un)willingness to do work.²³

A decade earlier, in *Chartism* (1840), he had made a similar point, proposing a dichotomous set of solutions to the problem of Ireland: “The time has come when the Irish population must either be improved a little, or else exterminated. . . . In a state of perennial ultra-savage famine, in the midst of civilisation, they cannot continue. For that the Saxon British will ever submit to sink along with them to such a state, we assume as impossible.”²⁴ And in “The Repeal of the Union” (1848), he uses the language of chattel enslavement (which he figures as “wholesome”) for the “savage” Irish: “Fruitless futile insurrections, continual sanguinary broils and riots that make his dwelling-place a horror to mankind, mark his progress generation after generation; and if no beneficent hand will chain him into wholesome *slavery*, and, with whip on back or otherwise, try to tame him, and get some work out of him,—Nature herself, intent to have her world tilled, has no resource but to exterminate him.”²⁵

Like Carlyle (with his references to “the Saxon British”), Knox would posit that the existence of different “races” within the United Kingdom was a demographic problem to be solved: “The source of all evil lies in *the race*, the Celtic race of Ireland,” he writes, his near-hysterical exasperation erupting in frenzied italics. “There is no getting over

historical facts” (253). Since Knox forecloses the possibilities of either “amalgamation” or the “conversion of one race into another,” the necessary solution, with reference to Oliver Cromwell’s seventeenth-century military brutalities in Ireland, was—as with Carlyle—a beneficial extermination:

The race must be forced from the soil; by fair means, if possible; still they must leave. England’s safety requires it. . . . The Orange club of Ireland is a Saxon confederation for the clearing [of] the land of all papists and jacobites: this means Celts. If left to themselves, they would clear them out, as Cromwell proposed, by the sword; it would not require six weeks to accomplish the work. (253–54)

Sectors of the midcentury British popular press, particularly the caricaturists, reveled in the putatively “scientific” association between Black and Irish. Curtis contends that “the dominant Victorian stereotype of Paddy looked far more like an ape than a man,” in a shift from both the Elizabethan representation of the “handsome features of the ‘wild Irishman’ . . . and different, too, from the brutish, slovenly faces of Irish peasants appearing in prints from the reign of George III.” In Curtis’s history of these images, “The process of simianizing Paddy’s features took place roughly between 1840 and 1890 with the 1860s serving as a pivotal point in this alteration of the stereotype.”²⁶ By 1862, in the wake of the 1859 publication of *The Origin of Species*, *Punch* would give the stereotype a fashionably Darwinian spin in “The Missing Link,” a prose spoof of evolutionary discourse:

A gulf, certainly, does appear to yawn between the Gorilla and the Negro. The woods and wilds of Africa do not exhibit an example of any intermediate animal. But in this, as in many other cases, philosophers go vainly searching abroad for that which they would readily find if they sought for it at home. . . . It comes from Ireland, whence it has contrived to migrate; it belongs in fact to a tribe of Irish savages: the lowest species of the Irish Yahoo.²⁷

Thereby, Curtis contends, has *Punch*’s Irishman “devolved . . . from a primitive peasant to an unruly Caliban, thence to a ‘white Negro,’ and finally he arrived at the lowest conceivable level of the gorilla and the orangutan,” suggesting a coherent sliding scale of difference.²⁸

Despite these instances, though, the argument that this trope represents a consistent and culturally widespread understanding of the Irish as, in some way, fundamentally nonwhite can be overstated. The construction of nineteenth-century “race”—along with the place of the

Irish “Celt” or “Gael” within it—is admittedly complicated and, often, internally inconsistent or haphazardly deployed.²⁹ In fact, nineteenth-century scientific racialism provided conceptual tools not only for thinking about the “Celt” and the “Saxon” as distinct but *also* for thinking of them as variants within a broader unity. And that unity depended upon the development of a theory, beginning in the eighteenth century and developing in the course of the nineteenth, of whiteness as a racial category simultaneously multiple and unified. In *The History of White People*, Nell Irvin Painter traces that development to Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*, which, she shows, undergoes significant revisions between its appearance as his doctoral dissertation in 1775 and its much more extensive 1795 third edition that introduced the term “Caucasian” into racial classification: “In the interim,” she demonstrates, “skin color, not heretofore the crucial factor for Blumenbach, had risen to play a large role. He now sees it necessary to rank skin color hierarchically, beginning, not surprisingly, with white.”³⁰ That consolidation was not limited to racial whiteness; when, in his “Notes on the five varieties of Mankind,” Blumenbach listed the “Ethiopian variety” (along with the “Caucasian variety,” the “Mongolian variety,” the “American variety,” and the “Malay variety”), he conflates people from widely different cultures, languages, appearances, and ethnicities. It is a collapse of heterogeneity into homogeneity that he acknowledges even while enacting it: “There is no character which does not shade away by insensible gradation from this variety of mankind to its neighbours, which is clear to every one who has carefully considered the difference between a few stocks of this variety, such as the Foulahs, the Wolufs, and Mandingos, and how by these shades of difference they pass away into the Moors and Arabs.”³¹ Here, the term “variety” comes to name the broader “Ethiopian” racial category (which he also at points calls “Negro”); vast differences *within* that variety become, in an ugly Victorian translation, “stocks.”³²

For Blumenbach, all racial categories derived from a single originary source, a theory that came to be known as monogenism. There are, in his account, “Five Principal Varieties of Mankind, One Species” (264). More specifically, he describes nonwhite typologies of skin color, hair texture, and other physical characteristics as having “degenerated” over historical time from an originary “Caucasian variety” through environmental effects of climate, diet, and other factors (207–63): the Caucasian “is white in colour, which we may fairly assume to have been the primitive colour of mankind, since . . . it is very easy for that to degenerate into

brown, but very much more difficult for dark to become white” (269). (That said, he also claims that “it has been recorded that Ethiopians, when they have changed their climate in early infancy, and from that time forward have inhabited a temperate zone, have gone on getting paler by degrees” [222].) “It is well known,” Blumenbach contends, “that the national colour of their skin is not congenital even to the Ethiopians themselves, but is acquired by the access of the external air after birth” (211).

Becoming influential in the early nineteenth century, however, an alternative history—so-called polygenism—contended that races (in numbers that varied with different authors) had distinct origins, in violation of the biblical narrative, and represented different biological species.³³ George Stocking Jr. writes of this claim: “On the basis of skeletal and cranial evidence, polygenists insisted that blacks were physically distinct and mentally inferior; on the basis of the racial representations on ‘ancient Egyptian monuments’ they argued that races had remained unchanged throughout the major portion of human history; on the basis of the mortality of whites in tropical areas they hypothesized that different races were aboriginal products of different ‘centers of creation’ and could never fully ‘acclimate’ elsewhere; on the basis of anecdotal evidence they asserted that the hybrid offspring of blacks and Europeans were only partially interfertile.”³⁴ While polygenism underwrote a number of the most flamboyantly racist claims, both models could support the privileging of whiteness: in Blumenbach’s monogenism, Caucasianness represents the peak from which other racial “varieties” degenerate, whereas for the polygenists, nonwhite persons represented a distinct species (although not all used that specific term).

It is true, therefore, that our modern categories of race have not always existed; “whiteness” has, over centuries, come into being as a privileged category that includes certain human beings and excludes others, and its boundaries have not been universally stable. As Painter writes, describing American constructions of race, “Rather than a single, enduring definition of whiteness, we find multiple enlargements occurring against a backdrop of the black/white dichotomy.”³⁵ In that way, the Irish did, at some point, “become white”; the question is not only whether that happened in the nineteenth century but also whether the Irish subsumption into whiteness was a process categorically different from that of other groups. While this article attends particularly to the former question, there is evidence even for the latter that the distinction has at times been overstated. The *Oxford English Dictionary* finds instances

of “white” as an umbrella designation for “a light-skinned group of people, esp. one of European origin or descent” at least as far back as the sixteenth century.³⁶ And, in fact, as Alden T. Vaughan explains, even before the rise of scientific racism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Irish were generally understood as white: “Despite virulent English antipathy toward the Irish during [the seventeenth century] . . . the Irishman’s whiteness was incontrovertible.”³⁷

Knox did contend—contra Blumenbach—that there was no “Caucasian” race; that is, he really did argue for a fundamental distinction between “Saxon” and “Celt” (and other “races”), and some aligned writers similarly posited an intrawhite polygenism. But Knox—even bracketing the fact that, as Reginald Horsman puts it, he was “the anatomist who had been responsible for buying the hardly cold, murdered bodies provided by the notorious Burke and Hare in the Edinburgh of the 1820s”—was a bit of a crank and not as representative as he is occasionally made to seem in present-day criticism.³⁸ Stocking, while acknowledging that “the physical anthropological viewpoint was by no means without influence,” calls him “marginal to the mainstream of nineteenth-century British anthropological thought.”³⁹ (This is a far cry from Brantlinger’s nomination of Knox to the status of “minor Victorian sage” and his racial theories as “hegemonic” after the 1840s.)⁴⁰ “Except for the overriding theme of the supreme importance of race,” Horsman concludes, “Knox had little coherence of thought, and there was hardly any logical progression in his arguments.”⁴¹

Importantly—and in line with Lloyd’s critique—in neither of these models, at least in their most influential formulations, was it necessary for the Irish in particular to “become white,” since that phrasing suggests there was an existing category of “whiteness” which excluded the Irish before it included them. For Blumenbach, both “Anglo-Saxon” and “Celt” are explicitly “Caucasian”; he designated these subcategories as “nations,” drawing distinctions amidst “the natural diversity which separates the races and the multifarious nations of men” (*hominum gentes et nationes multifarias*).⁴² Although he doesn’t subscribe to this model, Blumenbach does, in 1795, offer as a point of comparison Christoph Meiners’s reduction of “all nations to two stocks: (1) handsome, (2) ugly; the first white, the latter dark.” Blumenbach specifically notes, as a point of interest, that for Meiners, “Celts, Sarmatians, and oriental nations” are included in “the handsome stock” (268).⁴³ In contrast, it is true that in Knox the Celt is not white—but neither is the Scandinavian or the Saxon; for Knox there *is* no general category of

whiteness into which the Irish would or would not fall. Far too often we assume that if Knox asserts the Celt and the Saxon are different “races” (and that the Saxon is superior in various ways to the Celt) he means that the Saxon is white and the Celt is not, but that isn’t the framework he’s using.

Part of the challenge for those of us working from within the context of twenty-first-century racial categories is the multiplicity of the term “race” itself for nineteenth-century writers. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* relates, the term’s meaning as “any of the (putative) major groupings of humankind, usually defined in terms of distinct physical features or shared ethnicity, and sometimes (more controversially) considered to encompass common biological or genetic characteristics,” arises in the later eighteenth century and comes to prominence in the nineteenth, but is “frequently overlapping with, and difficult to distinguish from” two earlier senses: “a tribe, nation, or people, regarded as of common stock,” and “a group of several tribes or peoples, regarded as forming a distinct ethnic set.” The fact that it continued at times to bear the older meaning of “a house, family, kindred” (as in the speaker’s claim, in Alfred Tennyson’s “The Sisters,” that “We were two daughters of one race”) only adds to the confusion.⁴⁴ De Nie is surely right about the conflation of culture and biology. When a writer describes Celts as a “race,” that might suggest what the *OED* calls “the (putative) major groupings of humankind,” but it also might suggest something more like a tribe or nation or—to use a term that had not yet taken on this meaning—an ethnicity.

The imprecision of “race” within the rhetoric of putative racial science struck even its practitioners. The French anthropologist Paul Broca, for instance, complained that “the word *race* has thus, in the language of authors, two very different significations,” since it was possible to speak of “the white races” (in the plural), including “the Arabs, the Basques, the Celts, the Kimris, the Germans, the Berbers, etc.,” and “the black races,” including “the Ethiopian Negroes, the Caffres, the Tasmanians, Australians, Papuans, etc.,” while it was also possible to speak of each of those umbrella “ensembles” as themselves races; while somewhat inconsistent in his own usage, Broca tentatively—like a number of polygenists—proposed “race” for the former (small) units and “species” for the latter (larger) ones.⁴⁵ Again, the Celts appear as one of the “white races.”

In contrast to categorical distinctions between white and nonwhite, Stocking proposes that (*within* the context of what we think of as whiteness) “much of Anglo-Saxon and other forms of ‘racial’ nationalism”

were predominantly “cultural phenomena” and “biological only in a secondary way.”⁴⁶ This was the case in Britain as well as the United States, and in both scientific and popular accounts. By the late 1840s, the English physician and zoologist William Benjamin Carpenter could refer generally to “those nations (commonly termed Caucasian) which, in the form of their skulls and other physical characters resemble Europeans.”⁴⁷ And in 1849 the *North British Review* could both acknowledge and dismiss the notion of intrawhite racial distinctions by noting somewhat exasperatedly that “in practical politics it is certainly possible to push such ethnographical considerations too far, as, for example, in our own cant about Celt and Saxon, when Ireland is under discussion.” For the *North British Review*, “it is only by a firm and efficient handling of this conception of our species as broken up into so many groups or masses, physiologically different to a certain extent, that any progress can be made,” and it denominates the relevant “three great types or varieties into which naturalists have divided the inhabitants of our planet” as “Negro,” “Mongolian,” and “Caucasian.” The reviewer asserts that “every school-boy knows” this.⁴⁸

That is, an emerging “scientific” reification of whiteness as a meaningful and coherent category, notwithstanding internal variety, arises in Britain as in the United States, although in admittedly uneven ways. And it shaped understandings of how to think about what was sometimes called the Irish “race question.” In 1869 the Knoxian anthropologist J. W. Jackson would, on one hand, assert that “inferior and non-Aryan racial elements are clearly perceptible in the population of the sister isle [Ireland].” On the other hand, though, he also claimed that it is a difference of degree from the situation in England, not an opposition of kind; for geographical reasons, “Ireland, during the historic period, was imperfectly Teutonised and not at all Romanised.” For Jackson, Ireland is merely at one “extremit[y] of the Caucasian area.” (The other “extremity,” in his account, is India.)⁴⁹ Even in the “cultural” arena, Irish racialism was inconsistent and often quickly abandoned. In 1867, in *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, Matthew Arnold had offered a similar analysis to Jackson’s while wrestling with the question of what—if Celts and Saxons are in fact racially distinct—happened to all of those aboriginal Celts. For Arnold, as for Jackson, the solution is racial admixture, a combination of Celt and Saxon in some relative proportions to produce British whiteness: “Of deliberate wholesale extermination of the Celtic race, all of them who could not fly to Wales or Scotland, we hear nothing; and without some such extermination one would suppose that a great

mass of them must have remained in the country, their lot the obscure and, so to speak, underground lot of a subject race, but yet insensibly getting mixed with their conquerors, and their blood entering into the composition of a new people.”⁵⁰

Arnold is frequently understood as drawing a firmly Knoxian line between the Celt and the Saxon.⁵¹ In fact, despite what he posits as essential racial differences, he actually moves toward subsuming those distinctions under a larger aegis of whiteness: “Fanciful as the notion may at first seem,” he proposes, the “march of science” has come to the conclusion that “there is no such original chasm between the Celt and the Saxon as we once popularly imagined, that they are not truly . . . *aliens in blood* from us, that they are our brothers in the great Indo-European family.”⁵² This language of the “Indo-European family” derives from the British ethnologist James Cowles Prichard, who did not invent it but who was instrumental in shepherding its shift from linguistics to race.⁵³ Prichard dedicated subsequent editions of his *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind* (1813) to Blumenbach, and he refers to Blumenbach’s category of the “Caucasian,” although he finds it misleading as a designation for one of what he calls the “great departments of the human family.”⁵⁴ In *The Eastern Origin of the Celtic Nations*, published in 1831, Prichard both offered “proofs of a common origin derived from the grammatical structure of the Celtic and other Indo-European languages” and argued that “the use of languages really cognate must be allowed to furnish a proof, or at least a strong presumption, of kindred race.”⁵⁵ What Arnold calls “the great Indo-European family”—including the Celt—is thus an adaptation of what Blumenbach and his ethnological descendants had designated the “Caucasian.” In a nuanced reading of Arnold’s racialism, Lecourt posits that he “used racial polygenesis to dramatize a project of cultural hybridity,” drawing “freely and unsystematically upon[,] . . . on the one hand, comparative philology, which read human progress as the collaborative project of different racial families, and, on the other hand, the polygenist anthropology of Robert Knox and James Hunt.”⁵⁶ When it comes to the Celt, what this results in is a type of Knoxian differentiation and racial polygenism retrofitted within a comfortable Blumenbachian assurance of a broadly understood whiteness.

Given all of this, the argument that the early or mid-nineteenth-century Irish were, in a general way, understood as nonwhite frequently seems grounded in an overprivileging of specifically Knoxian polygenism. And, in fact, R. F. Foster has convincingly challenged Curtis’s characterizations of the British caricatures of Irish simianism as, inevitably,

cherry-picked. It is certainly true, Foster acknowledges, that “*Punch’s* classic characterization of the Irish remained much the same from the 1850s on; and it was by and large bestial.” But, importantly, “by contrast the *Graphic* and the *London Illustrated News*, though they were far from endorsing Irish nationalist politics, showed Irish crowds as handsome, well formed and physically varied.” Even in *Punch*, Hibernia (the allegorical representation of Ireland) “is pure and lovely, with classical limbs, and a pure line from forehead to chin which approximates to [Petrus] Camper’s ideal ninety degrees.”⁵⁷ *Punch* could certainly be anti-Irish, Foster concedes, “but no more obsessively than it was anti-medical students, or anti-politicians, or anti-income tax. Nor were its representations of the Irish very pronouncedly different in physiognomy from the representations of English plebeians” (174).

And while midcentury *Punch* was frequently gleefully anti-Catholic, it is also not the case that the variations in its representations of Irishness are invariably sectarian, despite the frequent claim that it was really only the *Catholic* Irish who were understood as nonwhite. Theodore Allen, for example, in *The Invention of the White Race* (1994), which would become a key source for Ignatiev, insists upon that point as the linchpin of the analogy he draws between the Protestant Ascendancy and white supremacy in the Americas: “If the English colonial system of racial oppression in Ireland was to be perpetuated,” Allen writes, “it was essential that the people not be converted, but remain Catholic.”⁵⁸ “In these details,” Ignatiev asserts, “Allen reveals the essential identity of the Irish and American cases,” that is, the status of the Catholic Irish under British colonial rule and people of African descent under the American regimes of white supremacy, including enslavement.⁵⁹ But the distinction between a “white” Protestant Ireland and a “non-white” Catholic (or Celtic) Ireland fails to hold convincingly. For instance, as Foster points out, when the Roman Catholic Daniel O’Connell appeared in *Punch’s* caricatures, “his theatrical, self-parodying, larger-than-life elements were much appreciated; foxy, sometimes brusquely ironic, and nobody’s fool, but with a heart of gold, O’Connell appears in the early volumes as a sort of Irish Mr Punch” (174).

From the other side of the coin, we can see an instance of the problem even in one of *Punch’s* most famous anti-Irish cartoons of the mid-nineteenth century, the 1848 representation of the ardent nationalist John Mitchel, later convicted of “treason felony” and transported, as an “Irish monkey.”⁶⁰ On the question of the basis for the ostensible

racialization, Curtis hedges; he mentions the cartoon in a paragraph whose topic sentence describes a “link between anthropoid apes and Irish Celts” without acknowledging that, as an Ulster Protestant, Mitchel’s relationship to “Celticness” (let alone Catholicism) was complicated.⁶¹ It is true, as Bryan P. McGovern points out, that Mitchel himself became “convinced that his family descended from Gaelic stock, and it is possible, although highly doubtful, that the Mitchels were once Gaelic Catholics who converted to Protestantism to save their land.”⁶² But Mitchel’s own genealogical fantasies are largely irrelevant to *Punch*; it is his politics that *Punch* represents as bestial, not his (non-)Celticness. Even the fact that Mitchel, notwithstanding his efforts to point out British tyranny in every aspect of Irish life, could propose that his ancestors converted from Catholicism itself undermines Allen’s argument that Catholic Irishness was “analogous” to American Blackness because the Protestant Ascendancy made it virtually impossible to convert. Anti-Catholicism might be the motive behind the racial tropes in a number of representations of the nineteenth-century Irish, but it is not typically their basis.

So what accounts for the common although by no means universal “simian” representations of the Irish, particularly from the mid-1840s on? As Foster, taking a wider view, shows, *Punch*’s “representation of *all* working-class types was dark and brutish; all enemies, especially class enemies, tended to the monster. (French apes were a commonplace.)” (192; emphasis mine). And “From 1845, with an avalanche of starving Irish emigrants landing up in British cities, the attitude hardened” (176). As Martin has detailed, the rise of a more radical Irish nationalism that *Punch* opposed inspired a spate of images of racialized Fenian alterity,⁶³ and the depiction of Mitchel is an early instance. “Certainly,” Foster allows, “the attitude was colonial”: “How *could* they not know what was good for them?” (193). But the satirical racialization seems more the means than the end. Mitchel himself, once he arrived in the United States, argued for the reestablishment of the Atlantic slave trade, remarking in a letter to a friend that “I bethink me that I do not perfectly know the position held just now by the Catholic Church with respect to the *enslavement* of men. Whatever that may be, however, it has no application to negro slaves bought on the coast of Africa. To enslave *them* is impossible, or to set them free either; they are born and bred slaves.”⁶⁴ Mitchel’s whiteness was as central to his politics as his desired Celticness.

None of this should obscure the fundamental point, which is that nineteenth-century caricaturists, in both prose and image, turned to

racist stereotypes of Black and other nonwhite people in order to mock *whites* who—for whatever reason—came under critique. After all, the deprecatory rhetorical alignment of the Irish with nonwhite people was frequently rather scattershot: the Irish-born (but London-based) royal physician James Johnson, giving an account of his early 1840s “tour in Ireland,” describes Killarney guides as “an amusing race” who “swarm about the hotels like the Hindoos and Mahomedans on the beach at Madras,” Cashel as “a city of wig-wams inhabited by Titanians,” and the “Hibernian” as “like a Mahomedan Cadi.” He declares that “the murders of this county [Tipperary] would disgrace the most gloomy wilds of the most savage tribes that ever roamed in Asia, Africa, or America.”⁶⁵ For all of Johnson’s racialized rhetoric, this is not a serious attempt at racial taxonomy but rather the deployment, in the interest of evocative insult, of whatever racist stereotype of nonwhite persons comes to hand. As David Theo Goldberg states more generally, “The charged atypicality of the Irish or Jews in the European context . . . is comprehended and sustained only by identifying each respectively with and in terms of the conjunction of blackness, (European) femininity, and the lumpenproletariat.”⁶⁶ That says far more about the largely unquestioned ideologies of anti-Black racism than about prejudice toward, for example, deliberately disparaged subsets of whites.⁶⁷

We can see the centrality of Irish whiteness and its dependence upon rhetorical or corporeal racial violence in the unapologetically racist accounts of the English historian and Liberal politician Edward Augustus Freeman, who visited the United States from 1881 to 1882. His most notorious characterization of the relationship between Irish and Black Americans in the years following the Civil War and Reconstruction is likely his claim—which he asserted was “approved” by “very many” in the United States—that “the best remedy for whatever was amiss would be if every Irishman should kill a negro and be hanged for it.” The quip appears in *Some Impressions of the United States* (1883) after a forthrightly racist representation of nineteenth-century politics that both contrasts Irish and Black electoral interests and balances them: “Men better versed in American matters than myself point out to me the fact that the negro vote balances the Irish vote. But one may be allowed to think that an Aryan land might do better still without any negro vote, that a Teutonic land might do better still without any Irish vote.”⁶⁸ It does seem, at least when taken out of context, that Freeman understands the Irish as racially cognate with Black people. But that is not actually the case. What Freeman poses here as a kind of equivalency of ethnic

and racial distinction is quickly refigured as fundamental difference across what Frederick Douglass would almost precisely contemporaneously designate the color line.⁶⁹ On one hand, “the Irishman is, after all, in a wide sense, one of ourselves. He is Aryan; he is European; he is capable of being assimilated by other branches of the European stock.” For Freeman, the trouble with the Irish is a political (and collective) problem, not in the end a racial one: “There is nothing to be said against this or that Irishman all by himself. . . . It is only when Irishmen gather in such numbers as to form an Irish community capable of concerted action that any mischief is to be looked for from them.”⁷⁰ On the other hand—and in specific contradistinction to the Irish—Black people for Freeman are fundamentally different from his “Aryan” model in a way that the Irish are not: “To the old question, Am I not a man and a brother? I venture to answer: No. The negro may be a man and a brother in some secondary sense; he is not a man and a brother in the same full sense in which every Western Aryan is a man and a brother. He cannot be assimilated; the laws of nature forbid it.”⁷¹ Freeman makes the genocidal implications of his racial politics explicit in a fantasy of what would come to be called ethnic cleansing: “The Irish difficulty is troublesome just now; it is likely to be troublesome for some time to come; but it is not likely to last for ever. But the negro difficulty must last, either till the way has been found out by which the Ethiopian may change his skin, or till either the white man or the black departs out of the land.”⁷² Published just over three decades after Robert Knox’s pronouncement in *The Races of Man* that “the [Celtic] race must be forced from the soil,” Freeman’s text makes clear that such eliminationist rhetoric survives in the later nineteenth century—but with the Irish here clearly aligned with the white masters. Even Carlyle, in “The Repeal of the Union,” makes the point explicit: “The Celts of Connemara, and other repealing finest peasantry, are white and not black; but it is not the colour of the skin that determines the savagery of a man.”⁷³ The issue is habitual, dispositional, even political and historical, but not essentially racial. (Knox himself can’t seem to distinguish “Celts”—a putatively racial term—from “papists and jacobites”—terms of religious and political threat.)

This certainly supports de Nie’s argument that nineteenth-century race is “cultural” rather than “biological”—except that for all its fictiveness, the color line between white and Black exerted real and brutal power. In his *Latter-Day Pamphlets* of 1850, for example, Carlyle repeatedly uses the trope of the chain to describe Irish disadvantage; in a fantasized

“Speech of the British Prime Minister to the floods of Irish and other Beggars,” he imagines “some three millions of you, as I count: so many of you fallen sheer over into the abysses of open Beggary; and, fearful to think, every new unit that falls is *loading* so much more the chain that drags the others over.”⁷⁴ In a virtuosic reading of this fantasy, Vanessa D. Dickerson points out that “the literal and figurative chains that fetter blacks restrict only blacks even as they promote white civilization; however, the figurative chains that fetter the Irish and the British pauper are the particular concern of British Victorians because they impede white progress. . . . The chain the Irish wear is more than a manacle of economic depression and oppression but one of connectedness to other whites.”⁷⁵ As Dickerson observes, Carlyle’s racial model works through the deployment of rhetorics of similarity and difference that only seem to be mutually contradictory. On one hand, “his fellow Victorians should not perceive the condition of blacks to be particularly special or important in the greater scheme of things”;⁷⁶ the spectacle of Black suffering can be mobilized as a trope for the “chaining” of Irish paupers. On the other, “he is careful to maintain the distinction ‘between our Black West Indies and our White Ireland, between these two extremes of lazy refusal to work, and of famishing inability to find any work’”; any sympathy accruing to Irish hardship need not be extended to persons of African descent.⁷⁷ For all the rhetoric of degradation, the Celt, when Carlyle comes right down to it, is white.

The key aspect of these racialized portraits is the fact that Blackness is represented as its own insult while Irishness is insulted by being brought into alignment with it. The caricatures—and the scientific racists like Knox—almost never mock the Black man for being like the Irishman; they mock the Irishman for being like the Black man. This is true even of satire like *Punch*’s “Missing Link,” which proposed that the Irish are closer to the gorilla than the African; the putative humor arises from the assumed incongruence of using the terms *commonly* leveled against Black people for the Irishman. It is predicated upon the more virulent and less questioned racism directed against Black people; the “Missing Link” appeared in the context of an issue of *Punch* that, in the wake of the promulgation of Abraham Lincoln’s preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, was largely given over to multiple pieces mocking the very idea of Black freedom and, indeed, Black humanity. The attack on the Irish, by contrast, depends upon the fact that they are white—and, therefore, that they have whiteness to lose through alignment with nonwhite people. That is, as Lloyd has proposed,

under the “law of verisimilitude, which governs the metaphorical system of racism, . . . the identity between ape and black is self-evident, and it is scandalized by the possibility of a conjunction between whiteness, as the outward sign of human identity, and the simian, which, as a metaphor, becomes a metaphor of nonidentity in the very structure of the human.”⁷⁸ Sheridan Gilley likely clinches the case with the simple observation that “here is the clear difference between nineteenth-century discussion of the relative merit of the so-called white races in ‘intra-European’ racial theory, and the racist attitude to coloured peoples: that ‘miscegenation’ between say, Saxons and Celts was normally regarded as a source of strength and a positive good, while racial mingling between white and black was always considered the reverse.”⁷⁹ For J. W. Jackson, the mismatch between relative levels of Teutonism and Celticism in England and Ireland is something to be solved not by enslavement or segregation but by gradual miscegenation. The imagined amenability of Irishness to Jackson’s plan is itself telling: it is, to use a term that had not quite yet been coined, a eugenic proposal, even if not enforced through state power, but it is a fundamentally different approach than that typically advocated for Black-white relations.⁸⁰

That racial hierarchy emerges even in a now-infamous derogation of Irishness in an 1860 letter from Charles Kingsley to his wife, written from County Sligo in the west of Ireland: “I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. . . . [T]o see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours.”⁸¹ We might read in this letter’s quiver of disgust a proleptic version of Conrad’s Marlow, forty years later: “We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman.”⁸² But there’s a difference: Conrad is describing Black African men; for Kingsley, the horror lies in the animalism of the (explicitly) *white* person, the Irish person who, *because he is white*, becomes uncanny in his degradation. The specter of Blackness haunts his description in an explicitly stated racist corollary: to imagine a Black person as a chimpanzee would not be as “dreadful”; the shock is to see the Irish as white people in that way. “If,” Gilley points out, “on one occasion [Kingsley] called the Irish ‘chimpanzees,’ on another he has his hero express the hope that intermarriage with the Irish might revive the exhausted and degenerate South Saxon race.”⁸³

The interplay between sometimes unspoken assumptions of Irish whiteness and complaints that the Irish were nonetheless treated as though they were not white becomes a staple of Irish (and allied) grievance throughout the nineteenth century. In an 1812 speech to the House of Lords, for example, George Gordon Lord Byron argued in favor of what was commonly called Catholic Emancipation by juxtaposing that cause with the abolition of slavery, a juxtaposition that quickly moved toward the assertion of the putatively *greater* suffering of the Irish. In response to those opponents of Catholic enfranchisement who argued that “the Catholics have too much already,” Byron asserted that “it might as well be said, that the negroes did not desire to be emancipated, but this is an unfortunate comparison, for you have already delivered them out of the house of bondage without any Petition on their part, but many from their task-masters to a contrary effect.” Still further, he continued, “for myself, when I consider this, I pity the Catholic peasantry for not having the good fortune to be born black.”⁸⁴

Byron’s reference here is fundamentally misleading: the 1807 Slave Trade Act and the 1811 Slave Trade Felony Act to which he alludes moved toward the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, but Britain did not in fact emancipate enslaved people throughout the empire until the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, over two decades after Byron’s speech (even then, there was both an extended transition and an exception for “Territories in the Possession of the East India Company”). Further, of course, Olaudah Equiano and others had brought active campaigns against slavery to Ireland and Britain in the 1790s, rendering absurd Byron’s assertion that there had been no “petition” on the part of Black people for freedom.⁸⁵ Notwithstanding its duplicity, the tactical conflation of the Irish with enslaved people of African descent was not limited to Byron. In fact, it arose as a common analogy at the opening of the nineteenth century, often advanced by white liberals in the interest of political progress and, particularly, in support of Irish enfranchisement. Just days before Byron’s speech, the liberal Charles Stanhope, Third Earl Stanhope, for example, went still further, likewise standing before the Lords “to call the attention of the House to a train of sufferings not exceeded, perhaps not paralleled, by those of the slave,—in all cases equally unjust, and in most equally attended with horrid and calamitous circumstances. He alluded to the state of the Irish Peasantry under the present laws, as they related to the recovery of rent.”⁸⁶

The argument is as tendentious as the analysis is shoddy, the alignment of the situation of Irish Catholics (“the recovery of rent”!) with that

of chattel slaves made possible by a rhetorical sleight of hand, appropriating the affective pull of Black suffering for white liberalism and thereby conflating two radically different situations in the interest of white ethnic progress. This was by no means a rare conflation in Irish nationalist writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Kieran Quinlan has asserted that “it was not, of course, that the Irish in Ireland confused their own situation with that of chattel slaves in America,” which might—on a deep level—be true.⁸⁷ After all, as Joseph Rezek points out, many early nineteenth-century Irish people certainly had reason to know about the conditions of actual chattel enslavement: “Some Irish landowners held plantations in the West Indies; residents in Ireland consumed profitable slave commodities like sugar and tobacco; and small-scale domestic slavery in Ireland itself accounted partly for the presence of a small black population.”⁸⁸ But by the late eighteenth century a strategic slippage between the experience of Irish persons and that of enslaved Black people was *useful* to writers about Ireland, in that it could advance a political argument. The appropriation and metaphorization of Black chattel enslavement by Irish writers as a figure for Irish disadvantage stretches from the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth, and beyond, in popular as well as political nationalist and anticolonial writing. In *Practical Education*, published in 1798, for example, Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth entertain a literal similarity between the Irish and enslaved people: the “description, which Mr. [Bryan] Edwards, in his history of the West Indies, gives of the propensity to falsehood amongst the negro slaves, might stand word for word for a character of that class of the Irish people who, till very lately, actually, not metaphorically, called themselves *slaves*.”⁸⁹ “I perceive,” writes the epistolary narrator of Sydney Owenson’s widely popular *Wild Irish Girl* (1806), that “my father emulates the policy of the British Legislature, and delegates English ministers to govern his Irish domains”; he aligns that political domination with the brutality of enslavement itself: “It is certain, that the diminutive body of our worthy steward, is the abode of the transmigrated soul of some *West Indian* planter.”⁹⁰ Daniel O’Connell himself—an antislavery activist as well as an Irish nationalist—was prone to falling back upon that misleading equivalency: in an 1814 speech to the Catholic Board in Dublin, O’Connell announced of Irish Catholics that “I flattered myself that we had risen in their [Protestant] estimation; I did imagine we had ceased to be whitewashed negroes, and had thrown off for them all traces of the colour of servitude; but this correspondence has, I confess, done away [with] the delusion.”⁹¹ The patriot writer

Thomas Moore, poet of the widely popular *Irish Melodies*, declared in the preface to his 1840–41 collected works that “born of Catholic parents, I had come into the world with the slave’s yoke around my neck.”⁹² That was, of course, not in any literal sense true.

The rhetorical invocation of putative Irish slavery is not independent of allusions to the *actual* enslavement of Black persons; that is, it is not—at least by the nineteenth century—the case that the word simply meant different things, one applicable to the situation of the Irish vis-à-vis England and one applicable to the situation of chattel slaves under the race-based enslavement regimes of the United States or the British Empire. The figure of speech that aligns the literal with the metaphorical also permits a type of thought that understands two radically different situations, both admittedly brutal, as cognate. As Liam Hogan, Laura McAtackney, and Matthew C. Reilly have made clear, the distinctions matter tremendously:

Colonial servitude in the Anglo-Caribbean was temporary and non-hereditary, with legal personhood, while chattel slavery was perpetual and hereditary with subhuman legal status. It is inevitable that if we refer to these two different statuses in the same historical context using the same term (“slave”) these profound distinctions are erased. The refusal to differentiate often reveals a motivation to equate indentured servitude for Europeans with African chattel perpetual slavery to claim spuriously that slavery had nothing to do with race.⁹³

As Nikole Hannah-Jones has detailed, the distinctions between that enslavement and forms of labor abuse that might be inflicted upon non-Black persons became absolute by the eighteenth century, with the emergence of a “brutal system of racial slavery that through the decades would be transformed into an institution unlike anything that had existed in the world before”: “Chattel slavery was not conditional but racial. It was heritable and permanent, not temporary, meaning generations of Black people were born into it and passed their enslaved status on to their children. Enslaved people were not recognized as human beings but were considered property that could be mortgaged, traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift, and disposed of violently.”⁹⁴

We need to make this clear: the insistence that Irishness was a category of nonwhiteness comparable in significant ways to Blackness functions to displace the specificity of Black experience, indeed as a form of white-supremacist appropriation of that experience. Given the fundamental legal, cultural, and social distinctions, the implication that

Irishness is cognate to Blackness—or the Irish experience a version of the Black experience—represents the epistemological and ethical error that Frank B. Wilderson III has called “the ruse of analogy”: “a mystification, and often erasure, of Blackness’s grammar of suffering.”⁹⁵ It is essential to distinguish between forms of disadvantage, to acknowledge that not all manifestations of what is often identified as “racialization” were enacted upon bodies and lives in the same or even cognate ways. The fact that a number of nineteenth-century Irish writers themselves—along with non-Irish witnesses to Irish political and economic hardship—made the argument that they were treated *as though* they were Black (and that this is particularly egregious because they were white) does not require that we take that claim at face value. This matters, because—as important as it has been to our understanding of the constructedness of racial whiteness—the critical attention paid to the putative non-whiteness of nineteenth-century Irishness can misleadingly suggest an equivalency between the radically distinct historical experiences of Black and Irish persons.⁹⁶

It is useful here to borrow Lynn Festa’s striking terminology of “affective piracy.” For Festa, this piracy arises in the work of white abolitionists; it is a type of theft through which “the sentimental mode’s investment in affective and psychological interiority helped distinguish the particularity of the human from the interchangeability of the commodity, the self-possessed individual from the dispossessed slave.”⁹⁷ In the claims of Irish slavery I have adduced, the piracy goes a step further in that an abolitionist agenda itself becomes secondary, even dispensable; advocates like Byron, Stanhope, Owenson, and Moore explicitly draw upon the image of the enslaved Black person *in order to* transfer that affective indignation to the white sufferer, at which point the situation of actual enslavement, while deplored, can be superseded *by* that white sufferer.⁹⁸ A signal example emerges in the Irish nationalist journal *The Nation*, which in 1847 mobilized the metaphorical application of slavery to the situation of Ireland as an excuse to do nothing about the actual enslavement of Black people in the United States: “we have really so very urgent affairs at home—so much abolition of *white* slavery to effect if we can . . . that all our exertions will be needed in Ireland. Carolina planters never devoured our substance, nor drove away our sheep and oxen for a spoil. . . . Our enemies are nearer home than Carolina.”⁹⁹ If this is not “solidarity based on color,” in Ignatiev’s terms, it is hard to know what is. The disavowal of the urgency of abolitionist activism here is predicated not only on distance (“home” as opposed to Carolina) and

political salience (“Carolina planters never devoured our substance”) but also, explicitly, on race, on the privileging of whiteness as the category that merits attention and care (“so much abolition of *white* slavery to effect if we can”), and the firm positioning of Irishness within that category.

The insistence upon Irish whiteness remains relevant to the expansion of racialized colonialism throughout the century. Writing about the era of the Celtic Revival, for example, D. G. Boyce observes that “some English might claim that the Irish were comparable to the Indians, needing the smack of firm government; but this was contradicted by the spectacle of Irishmen (Protestant and Catholic) spread throughout the empire busily ruling (and shooting) black and brown races.”¹⁰⁰ As F. S. L. Lyons relates, in 1889 the antiseparatist Irish nationalist John Dillon—a protégé of Mitchel and the brother of Mitchel’s early biographer William Dillon—“declared at Auckland that the Irish deserved self-government ‘because we are white men,’” an appeal “to an emotion deeply felt by many of his hearers, who, however sympathetic to Irish Home Rule, had no intention of applying that exhilarating doctrine to the people of Samoa.”¹⁰¹

In a now-famous 1846 letter to William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass wrote from Ireland, where he had met O’Connell and lectured extensively, describing his wonder at the lack of racism he experienced there: “Instead of the bright, blue sky of America, I am covered with the soft, grey fog of the Emerald Isle. I breathe, and lo! the chattel becomes a man.”¹⁰² The distinction between that description and Douglass’s numerous accounts of Irish-American racism frequently appears in claims that the Irish “became white” upon their arrival in the United States. But Douglass is not in any way proposing that race was not an operative concept in Ireland; indeed, in that same letter he describes the Irish in Ireland as being “as white as any I ever saw in the United States.” In 1845, in Limerick, he had found himself having to point out that, despite Irish assertions, “there was nothing like American slavery on the soil on which he now stood. Negro-slavery consisted not in taking away a man’s property, but in making property of him.”¹⁰³ Douglass, already in 1840s Ireland, was confronted with and forced to debunk the “ruse of analogy” deforming Irish advocacy for political and economic relief by appropriating the language of Black enslavement. Back in the United States in 1850, he similarly insisted upon the fundamental differences between Irish disadvantage and Black chattel enslavement: “It is often said, by the opponents of the

Anti-Slavery cause, that the condition of the people of Ireland is more deplorable than that of the American slaves. . . . I must say that there is no analogy between the two cases. The Irishman is poor, but he is *not* a slave. He *may* be in rags, but he is *not* a slave. He is still the master of his own body.”¹⁰⁴ In 1863 he would single out Irish Americans—as whites—as a key obstacle to Black enfranchisement: “I am told that the Irish element in this country is exceedingly strong, and that that element will never allow colored men to stand upon an equal political footing with white men. . . . Well, my friends, I admit that the Irish people are among our bitterest persecutors.” In that same speech, Douglass detailed the long history of penal laws enacted against Irish Catholics in Ireland but noted pointedly that “religion, not color, was the apology for this oppression.”¹⁰⁵

As messy and frequently incoherent as nineteenth-century understandings of race—like our own—could be, Douglass saw that they were not collapsible into generalizable forms of difference, that “county, religious, or national animosities,” in Ignatiev’s terms, simply did not have the salience of “solidarity based on color” on either side of the Atlantic. Douglass was an American visiting Ireland, and it might be objected that he brought with him his American notions of race into a context foreign to them. Yet Freeman and Mitchel—an Englishman and Irishman in the United States, and with diametrically opposed racial politics to Douglass’s—base their own racism in a similar epistemological model: that whiteness existed as an operative category, and that Irishness was included within it, whatever disadvantages or characterological faults the Irish might bear. If we are to understand the persistence of Irish reliance on the “ruse of analogy” as a mode of anti-Blackness from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, we should be clear about how race actually functioned in Victorian culture. We might make central anticolonial methods that represent Irish history, including its history of colonial oppression, without drawing on white-supremacist models. The first step should be to stop asking how the nineteenth-century Irish “became” white.

NOTES

1. Mufti, “Hating Victorian Studies Properly,” 392.
2. Curtis, *Apes and Angels*, 21.
3. Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings*, 98.
4. de Nie, “Medley Mob,” 216.

5. Ignatiev, *How the Irish*, 111.
6. Lloyd, "Black Irish, Irish Whiteness," 4.
7. At least as early as the 1790 Naturalization Act, Peter D. O'Neill points out, "The Irish [in America] always were understood to be among those 'free white' people whom the statute was intended to benefit. . . . Yet in the same period, that legal category was utterly unavailable to persons of African and Asian ancestry—even those who were US-born" (*Famine Irish*, 5). See also Jacobson, *Whiteness*, 22–31.
8. See, e.g., Sancho, *Letters*, 2:204.
9. Martin, "Victorian Ireland," 52.
10. Heng, *Invention of Race*, 3.
11. Lecourt, *Cultivating Belief*, 37.
12. Wheeler, *Complexion of Race*, 7.
13. Tucker, "Historicizing," 528. Lloyd, arguing that "the powerful work of naturalizing representation performed by aesthetics is an indelible determinant of the modern racial regime," likewise situates the roots of that regime in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory (*Under Representation*, 9). See also Hoffman, "Kant's Aesthetic Categories."
14. Knox, *Races of Men*, 13–14. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
15. See Hoffman, "Kant's Aesthetic Categories," for an account of the tension between Immanuel Kant's seemingly contradictory notions of race as "physiological or biological fact" and as nonbiological "aesthetic form" (72), both articulated as essential.
16. Jacobson, *Whiteness*, 48.
17. Beddoe, *Races of Britain*, 5.
18. Beddoe, *Races of Britain*, 11.
19. Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings*, 43.
20. Carlyle, "Occasional Discourse," 672.
21. Carlyle, "Occasional Discourse," 672.
22. For one strong analysis of the relationship between Carlyle's view of West Indian slaves and the Famine-era Irish, see MacKenzie, "Thomas Carlyle's 'The Negro Question.'"
23. Carlyle, "Occasional Discourse," 678.
24. Carlyle, *Chartism*, 29–30.
25. Carlyle, "Repeal of the Union," 276.
26. Curtis, *Apes and Angels*, 29.
27. "Missing Link," 165.
28. Curtis, *Apes and Angels*, 101.

29. See Horsman's "Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism" for an excellent overview of the crosscurrents and contradictions in nineteenth-century British theories of race.
30. Painter, *History of White People*, 79. On the rise of a science of whiteness, see also Jacobson, *Whiteness*, 31–38.
31. Blumenbach, *Anthropological Treatises*, 271 (from the 1795 third edition of the *Natural Variety of Mankind*). All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
32. John S. Michael has argued that an overreliance on the 1865 English translation by the forthrightly racist Thomas Bendyshe has led to a misunderstanding of the more egalitarian argument implicit in Blumenbach's original Latin ("Nuance Lost in Translation"). Nonetheless, this was the primary means by which Blumenbach's ideas entered nineteenth-century Britain.
33. See Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 62–69, 182–83; Lecourt, *Cultivating Belief*, 36–42, 50–58. While polygenism became more influential after 1800, David Theo Goldberg traces its roots back to the seventeenth century (*Racist Culture*, 63–65).
34. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 67.
35. Painter, *History of White People*, 201.
36. *Oxford English Dictionary* (online), "white," adj. (and adv.) and n., definition 5a (accessed June 19, 2022).
37. Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism*, 263n75.
38. Horsman, "Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism," 405.
39. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 65.
40. Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings*, 40.
41. Horsman, "Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism," 406.
42. Blumenbach, *Anthropological Treatises*, 188; Blumenbach, *De Generis*, 65.
43. Blumenbach's reference is to Meiners's *Grundriß der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 2nd ed. (1793).
44. *Oxford English Dictionary* (online), "race," n.6, definitions I.1.d, I.1.b, I.1.c, I.1.a (accessed June 19, 2022); see Tennyson, *Poems*, 1:132.
45. Broca, *Phenomena of Hybridity*, 12, 10–11.
46. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 64.
47. Carpenter, *Zoology*, 1:151.
48. "Art. IX," 528. The tripartite racial model—in contradistinction to Blumenbach's five-variety model—derives primarily from Georges Cuvier; see Cuvier, *Animal Kingdom*, 1:96–103.
49. Jackson, "Race Question," 58, 60, 59.
50. Arnold, *Study of Celtic Literature*, 90.

51. See, e.g., Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings*, 40.
52. Arnold, *Study of Celtic Literature*, 22.
53. Lecourt suggests that Arnold most directly encountered Prichardian monogenesis through the work of Max Müller (*Cultivating Belief*, 50, 68).
54. Prichard, *Researches*, 1:260. For Prichard's discussion of and dissension from the category of the "Caucasian," see 1:259–62; for reference to "the Indo-european race," see, e.g., 8. See also Lecourt, *Cultivating Belief*, 36–42.
55. Prichard, *Eastern Origin*, 91, 8.
56. Lecourt, *Cultivating Belief*, 165, 72.
57. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch*, 192–93. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text. Curtis disputed Foster's critique in the revised edition of *Apes and Angels*, 109–47.
58. Allen, *Racial Oppression*, 79.
59. Ignatiev, *How the Irish*, 216.
60. "British Lion and the Irish Monkey," 147. The artist was the prolific anti-Irish caricaturist John Leech.
61. Curtis, *Apes and Angels*, 100; see also 34 and 130.
62. McGovern, *John Mitchel*, 120.
63. See Martin, *Alter-Nations*, 52–158; de Nie, "Medley Mob."
64. Quoted in Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, 2:106. For the argument that Mitchel's *Jail Journal* (his memoir of transportation and escape) represents the theft of the generic tropes of the slave narrative in the interest of "Mitchel's commitment to the cause of Irish whiteness," see O'Neill, "Memory," 333.
65. Johnson, *Tour in Ireland*, 105, 146, 283, 144.
66. Goldberg, *Racial State*, 109.
67. Counterexamples do exist, especially in earlier periods; see, e.g., Hall, "'Troubling Doubles,'" 125, for a description of one early seventeenth-century text in which the racialization of the "savage inhabitants" of the Cape of Good Hope is at least partly grounded in a prior racialization of Irishness.
68. Freeman, *Some Impressions*, 139.
69. See Douglass, "The Color Line."
70. Freeman, *Some Impressions*, 142–43.
71. Freeman, *Some Impressions*, 145–46.
72. Freeman, *Some Impressions*, 143.
73. Carlyle, "Repeal of the Union," 276.
74. Carlyle, "The Present Time," 46.

75. Dickerson, *Dark Victorians*, 83–84.
76. Dickerson, *Dark Victorians*, 84
77. Dickerson, *Dark Victorians*, 83, quoting Carlyle, “The Present Time,” 32.
78. Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 82.
79. Gilley, “English Attitudes,” 86.
80. See Jackson, “Race Question,” 63.
81. Kingsley, *Charles Kingsley*, 2:107.
82. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 139.
83. Gilley, “English Attitudes,” 86. Gilley’s allusion to Kingsley’s praise of Irish intermarriage refers to *Yeast: A Problem* (1848).
84. *Parliamentary Debates*, 22:643.
85. See Rezek, “Transatlantic Influences and Futures,” 385; Kinealy, *Black Abolitionists in Ireland*, 41–59.
86. *Parliamentary Debates*, 22:393.
87. Quinlan, *Strange Kin*, 49.
88. Rezek, “Transatlantic Influences and Futures,” 382–83.
89. Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 1:211.
90. Owenson, *Wild Irish Girl*, 31, 34.
91. O’Connell, *Select Speeches*, 1:408.
92. Moore, *Poetical Works*, 1:xv.
93. Hogan, McAtackney, and Reilly, “Irish in the Anglo-Caribbean,” 19.
94. Hannah-Jones, “Democracy,” 12.
95. Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 37.
96. Important recent work that considers nineteenth-century Irishness and race formation without acceding to the “ruse of analogy” includes, among others, O’Neill’s *Famine Irish*; Mary L. Mullen’s “How the Irish Became Settlers”; and a number of the chapters in Lloyd and O’Neill’s edited collection *The Black and Green Atlantic*.
97. Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire*, 2–3.
98. On the comparable importance of actual chattel enslavement to the metaphor of white slavery in the United States, see Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 27–36, 65–92.
99. “Answers to Correspondents,” 280 (emphasis original).
100. Boyce, “‘The Marginal Britons,’” 265.
101. Lyons, *John Dillon*, 105.
102. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 371.
103. “Frederick Douglass,” *Limerick Reporter*, November 11, 1845; qtd. in Kinealy, *Frederick Douglass and Ireland*, 231.
104. Douglass, *Papers, Series One*, 2:258.
105. Douglass, *Papers, Series One*, 3:581.

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