Exaggeration and the appropriation of the torture of enslaved Africans in the “Irish slaves” meme

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Whenever they rebelled or even disobeyed an order, they were punished in the harshest ways. Slave owners would hang their human property by their hands and set their hands or feet on fire as one form of punishment. They were burned alive and had their heads placed on pikes in the marketplace as a warning to other captives.

This Facebook page was since deleted, but its meme lives on

This is part five of my series debunking/contextualising the “Irish slaves” meme. See Part One, Two, Three, Four, Six and Seven.
In 2013, the overtly racist Facebook page American White History Month 2 created a meme which claims that “Irish slaves” were “punished in the harshest ways” for both major and minor offences. It claims that “Irish slaves” were routinely hung from their hands and had their hands and feet set on fire. It claims that “Irish slaves” were burned alive, beheaded and had their severed heads placed on pikes as a warning to others. This meme is popular and today (10 November 2015) it reappeared on Twitter.
"Worse"

Not content with fallaciously equating indentured servitude with racialised perpetual hereditary chattel slavery, this meme is used by the usual suspects (racists, Neo-Confederates, white nationalists, white supremacists, Neo-Nazis) to claim that “white Irish slaves” were treated “worse” than enslaved Africans. While the introduction of the Oppression Olympics is offensive enough on its own, its claims of “harshest” and “worse” are largely built upon the appropriation of the history of the transatlantic slave trade.

A review of the the specific claims

Claim 1: “Slave owners would hang their human property by their hands and set their hands or feet on fire as one form of punishment.”

This refers to the case of John Thomas, an indentured servant in Barbados who in 1640 was hung from his wrists by Francis Leaver (his master) and Leaver’s brother-in-law Samuel Hodgskins. They placed matches between his fingers and set them alight.

Because of this cruel torture Thomas had “lost the use of several joints” in his hands. It
is somewhat ironic that the meme claims that such a punishment was normal for Irish indentured servants. Thomas was likely from England. It is also arguably one of the worst recorded examples of servant abuse in the seventeenth century Anglo-Caribbean. To claim that this was just “one form of punishment” as if it was legal or customary is disingenuous. More importantly, as John Thomas was a servant and not a slave, he had the right to complain about his treatment and to hopefully bring his torturers to trial. What followed (unfortunately for the meme) was an exceptionally rare example of a servant successfully suing for redress before a planter-dominated council. Both Leaver and Hodgkins were imprisoned and ordered to pay for Thomas’ medical treatment. Thomas was freed from his indenture and paid compensation that amounted to 5000 pounds of cotton. (See K.G. Davies, The North Atlantic World in the Seventeenth Century (1974), 107; Larry Dale Gragg, Englishmen Transplanted: the English Colonization of Barbados, 1627–1660 (2003), 129)

This was certainly an exceptional case. Servants were provided with minimal protections against abuse and the system they laboured under was focussed far more on the absolute control of their lives and labour (while bound) than their rights. For a thorough discussion of the development of indentured servitude in Barbados see Susan Dwyer Amussen, Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640–1700 (2009), 123–129.

Slaves were treated differently. They were not provided with even this scant level of protection. Common law did not apply. Their lives were essentially forfeit.

Claim 2: “They were burned alive and had their heads placed on pikes in the marketplace as a warning to other captives.”

This is shameless historical appropriation. This sentence describes the torture and brutal execution of African slaves, not white servants, that occurred in multiple European colonies in the 17th, 18th and 19th century. Generally servants who were found guilty of murder or insurrection were, like freemen, executed by hanging. Slaves in a similar situation suffered a more brutal fate and often for a less serious crime. After a slave conspiracy was uncovered in Antigua in late 1736, the council resorted to a campaign of utter brutality in a bid to frighten the slave population into complete submission and deter future insurrections. Dr Walter Tullideph, a Scottish planter and enslaver who has
a road named in his honour in Dundee, witnessed and participated in this campaign which resulted in *four months* of gruesome tortures and executions.

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"We are in a great deal of trouble in this Island; the burning of the Negroes, hanging them on gibbets alive, Racking them upon the wheel, &c. takes up almost all our time, that from the 20th of October to this Day, there have been destroyed sixty fine sensible Negroe Men, most of them Tradesmen, as Carpenters, Masons, and Coopers. I am almost dead with watching and warding, as are many more. They were going to destroy all the white inhabitants on the island."

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Court, the King of the Negroes, who was to head the Insurrection, Tomboy, their General, and Hercules their Lieutenant-General, were all rack’d upon the wheel, and died with amazing obstinacy.--- Mr. Archibald Hamilton’s Harry, after he was condemn’d, stuck himself with a knife in eighteen places, four whereof were mortal, which kill’d him. --- Col. Martin’s Jemmy, who was hung up alive from noon to eleven at night, was then taken down to give information. --- Col. Morgan’s Ned, who after he had been hung up seven days and seven nights, that his hands grew too small for his hand-cuffs, he got them out and raised himself up, and fell down from a gibbet 15 feet high without any harm; he was revived by cordials and broth, in hopes to bring him to a confession; but he would not confess, and was hung up again, and in a day and night after expired. --- Mr. Yeoman’s Quasby Coomach, jump’d out of the fire half burnt, but was thrown in again. ---
In total, six slaves were gibbeted alive. Five slaves were broken on the wheel. Seventy-seven slaves were burned alive. This barbarity only ceased because the public treasury ran out of money to “compensate” the slave-owners.

It is worth noting that Antigua was heavily reliant on the importation of Irish provisions in the late eighteenth century. Tullideph ordered his provisions from a Thomas Martin in Co. Cork and he paid for these goods with rum, a product of slave labour. By 1770 the Irish market absorbed nearly 90% of Antigua’s total rum exports and in 1774 Dublin imported 108,821 gallons of rum from this colony (see Truxes, 1988). The Roche and Kelly merchant families of Limerick exported provisions to Antigua and their factor there was Lawrence Nihell, also a Limerick man. There were also some Irish planters and slave-owners in Antigua at this time; Lynch, Murphy, Tuite, and Kirwan to name but a few.

According to Nini Rodgers, the “most dreaded [punishment] for a servant was an extension of indenture”, but a slave, suffering perpetual bondage, was subjected to an array of grotesque physical punishments. The brutal punishment meted out was often encouraged rather than reprimanded. Even the most minor offences could sometimes lead to ultra-violence, sadism, butchery. Referring to late-seventeenth century Montserrat, Don Akenson (An Irish History of Civilization, Volume 1 (London 2005), p. 340) highlighted the case of…

“Peter Boone an African who managed to steal nine pigs. In August 1693 he was hanged, his bowels drawn out and burned, and then he was cut into four quarters and displayed on the main public paths. A traditional punishment for white murderers and mutineers, that, but for pig stealing? Or, worst offence, the black who had nearly beaten his overseer to death: he was suspended in chains without food or water and allowed to slowly expire.” (Calendar of State Papers, 22 August 1693, Minutes of Council and Assembly of Montserrat)
The killing of “insolent” chattel slaves was thus promoted by Councils as a deterrent to disobedience. The colonial administrators were aware that slaves were a valuable asset and that it would be against the interests of their owners to destroy them. So weighing up the need for absolute coercion, they decided to offer generous compensation packages to those that murdered their “troublesome” stock.

In 1695 the Council of Nevis proceeded to “amend the Act to check the insolencies of Negroes” and so..

“The Council agreed that on the execution of any slave an order be issued for appraising his value, which shall be paid by the Treasurer up the value of 5,000 pounds of sugar.” (Calendar of State Papers, Minutes of the Council of Nevis, 5 August 1695. The 1678 census records that the island of Nevis was 22% Irish)

On “Irish” Montserrat, one slave who was found guilty of stealing a cow was “condemned to be burned [to death]” and 3,500 pounds of sugar was offered to his owner as compensation. That same day two other slaves were accused of stealing a different cow. The magistrates being unsure of their guilt, made them draw “lots for their lives, and he that drew the losing lot was condemned to death, the other being condemned to be severely whipped.” The slave that survived this horrific game of chance belonged to John Ryan, an Irish planter. (Calendar of State Papers, Minutes of General Assembly of Montserrat, 16 July 1695)

Sir Hans Sloane documented how slaves were tortured in Jamaica in the 1680s. “The punishments for crimes of slaves, are usually for rebellions burning them, by nailing them down with the ground on crooked sticks on every limb, and then applying the fire by degrees from the feet and hands, burning them gradually up to the head, whereby their pains are extravagant. For crimes of a lesser nature Gelding, or chopping off half of the foot with an ax.”

In New York a slave revolt in 1712 led to the execution of 21 enslaved persons. Governor Robert Hunter recorded that “Some were burnt, others hanged, one broke on the wheel, and one hung alive in chains in the town, so that there has been the most exemplary punishment inflicted that could be possibly thought of.” The cost of execution was “thirty six pounds & ten pence Current Money of New York it being Money by him disburse and laid out for iron work Gibbitts, Cartridge, labourers, firewood, and other
Materials.” After a slave conspiracy was uncovered in New York in 1741, thirteen enslaved Africans were burned alive.

In Jamaica some of the leaders of the 1760 slave rebellion known as ‘Tacky’s War’ were also burned alive. Tacky was beheaded and his head placed on a pike in Spanish Town. Two other leaders were gibbeted alive at the Kingston Parade.

In 1774 John Wesley appended a letter which contained two adverts for runaway slaves. One from Virginia and one from North Carolina. Both adverts offer a larger reward for the decapitation of the runaway rather than their capture.

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From the Williamsburg Gazette.

“Run away on the tenth instant, a lusty negro, named Bob. — The said fellow is outlawed; and I will give ten pounds reward for his head severed from his body, and forty shillings if brought alive.”

From one of the North Carolina newspapers.

“Ran away last November from the subscriber, a negro fellow, named Zeb; aged 36. As he is outlawed, I will pay twenty pounds currency to any person who shall produce his head severed from his body, and five pounds if brought home alive. John Moses.”

John Wesley, The Scots Magazine, Appendix 1774, Vol XXXVI

In the wake of 1811 German Coast Slave Uprising (Louisiana) 18 slaves were executed by firing squad and then beheaded. Their heads were placed on pikes. A contemporary wrote how “their Heads … decorate our Levée, all the way up the coast, I am told they look like crows sitting on long poles.” (See Daniel Rasmussen, American Uprising: The
Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt. New York, NY: Harper, 2011, p. 148) The leader of the revolt, Charles Deslondes, “had his hands chopped off then shot in one thigh & then the other, until they were both broken — then shot in the Body and before he had expired was put into a bundle of straw and roasted…”

In Demerara in 1823 a relatively peaceful slave revolt was met with overwhelming levels of violence. One of those gibbeted alive after the uprising was Billy Dillon. Another was called Murphy. Their names suggest that their enslavers were Irish. Furthermore two of the military leaders who suppressed the revolt were a Lt. Brady and a Capt. Leahy which again suggests an Irish connection. In fact they belonged to the 21st Royal North British Fusiliers, a regiment which took part in the suppression of Robert Emmet’s rebellion in Dublin in 1803.

From Joshua Bryant’s Account of an insurrection of the negro slaves in the colony of Demerara, which broke out on the 18th of August, 1823., Georgetown, Demerara: A. Stevenson at the Guiana Chronicle Office. High-res scan courtesy of Brown University archives.
The practice of dismembering, beheading, burning alive and gibbeting Africans in the Caribbean was not limited to those who were in open revolt. As Vincent Brown explains in his harrowing work *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery (2008)*, “slaveholders kept resorting to grisly techniques” to deter their slaves from committing suicide. This was a major concern for the enslavers as a significant numbers of Africans took their own lives to escape this living hell. In the 18th century Danish West Indies “the heads and hands of such suicides have been put in a cage on public display — a measure not without effective results.” In Saint-Domingue “French slavers mutilated the body of the first Ebo slave to die of suicide in a given shipment: they beheaded the corpse or sliced off its nose and pried out its eyes, to prevent losses among other captives..” In Cuba enslavers “incinerated corpses” of slaves who committed suicide. In mid-eighteenth century Jamaica, planters denied last rites to slaves who “self-murdered.” They did so by burning their dead bodies. This was apparently perceived by some Africans as a greater punishment than death. (Brown, p. 134) In 1823 John Stewart recalled how “the head of the unhappy wretch who [committed suicide] used to be cut off and fixed on a pole by the side of some public road, a dismal and disgusting spectacle, while the body was sometimes consumed by fire.”

Brown makes an important point about the purpose of this vicious butchery of enslaved Africans by their European enslavers. These “public executions were used more to dramatize the power of masters than to construct a community governed by recognizably just laws and punishments.” (p. 140)

**A review of the general claim**

**Claim 3: “The Irish Slave Trade. The forgotten white slaves. Whenever they rebelled or even disobeyed an order, they were punished in the harshest of ways.”**

Indentured servitude in the Anglo-Caribbean was not an “Irish only” experience. It is estimated that the majority of servants who laboured under this system were English. Most who became indentured servants in the British colonies did so willingly. In exchange for food, shelter and their passage across the Atlantic, they were bound to their master for a set period of time. Those who were reduced to indentured servitude by force or deception and had no prior agreement with a merchant, were equally required by law to serve the master who purchased their labour for a limited number of years, depending
on their age. Whether willing or not, Irish or not, they were all bonded labourers and while bound they were unfree.

Many servants in the British American colonies suffered hardships and the historical record is replete with examples of them being treated poorly or abused. An indentured servant’s bondage was time-limited, usually 3–7 years long but could be up to 10 years for PoWs or convicts. Richard Ligon (an English planter in Barbados from 1647–1650) lamented how the paternal/reciprocal relationship that existed at home between master and apprentice was diminished in the colony. As Planters controlled the councils and paid for the future labour of their servant in a lump sum it created a new exploitative dynamic which did not exist in England. This labour system commodified the servant to the extent that they were now a capital investment. Their labour, their “time”, was now legal property and it could be traded as such. Thus a servant’s labour was a type of chattel. Planters sought to extract the maximum return from their investment by working their servants from the moment they arrived into their “care” to the moment the indenture expired. The mortality rate was high. Many survived. Many did not.

An indentured servant was usually punished in the form of an extension of their term of service. They could also be whipped for “insolence” or mutinous behaviour. The meme states that servants were punished in the “harshest ways.” This relative claim is incorrect. They were certainly treated harshly, not “harshest”. African slaves were to serve for life and so the harshest physical punishments were reserved for them.

Amussen, referring to the Barbados Slave Code of 1661, surmised how

“Slaves who assaulted any “Christian” — regardless of the white person’s status — were harshly punished: for the first offence, they were “severely whipped”; for the second, they were whipped, had their nose slit, and were branded on the forehead; for the third offence, they suffered “greater corporal punishment” as determined by the justice of the peace.”

In comparison to Servants who

“…faced no special penalties for assault of anyone other than their master, mistress or overseer; they were covered by criminal law, which treated assault as a misdemeanour, punished by a fine.”
In 1654 Father Antoine Biet witnessed the horrific torture of slaves in Barbados. One of these slaves who was forced to eat his own roasted and severed ear belonged to an Irishman. Biet writes..

“They treat their Negro slaves with a great deal of severity. If some go beyond the limits of the plantation on a Sunday they are given fifty blows with a cudgel; these often bruise them severely. If they commit some other slightly more serious offense they are beaten to excess, sometimes up to the point of applying a firebrand all over their bodies which makes them shriek with despair. I saw a poor Negro woman, perhaps thirty-five or forty years old, whose body was full of scars which she claimed had been caused by her master’s having applied the fire-brand to her: this horrified me. As these poor unfortunates are very badly fed, a few occasionally escape during the night and go to steal a pig or something similar from a neighbouring plantation. But, if they are discovered, there is no forgiving them. One day I went to visit my Irishman. He had in irons one of these poor Negroes who had stolen a pig. Every day, his hands in irons, the overseer had him whipped by the other Negroes until he was all covered with blood. The overseer, after having had him treated thus for seven or eight days, cut off one of his ears, had it roasted, and forced him to eat it.”

Dr. Pinckard was in Berbice (later British Guiana) in 1796 and he was horrified by the sadistic torture of slaves in that colony. In one instance two slaves were whipped so badly that one died and the other (his partner) was horribly injured but offered no medical treatment. Leaving large open wounds unattended in a tropical environment was yet another grotesque punishment. He explained its effect.

“One morning, upon hearing the loud cries of a female, I was led to look out at my window, when I saw some negroes carrying this unfortunate woman from the sick house into the yard, where they laid her down in the dirt, upon the bare ground, amidst a heavy shower of rain, then, kneeling at her sides, they proceeded to examine minutely into her wounds ; and you will scarcely hold it credible, when I tell you that they were employed a full half-hour picking maggots out of her sores. The ulcerations had penetrated to a great depth, particularly within-side the thighs, where the lashes of the whips had cut round... The ulcers were very raw and considerably enlarged by the gnawing of the maggots which had been bred within them. I cannot describe to you the
horror I felt at this deplorable sight. I had often heard of maggoting sheep, but this was the first instance I had met with of maggoting a human being..."
Finally, we must mention Thomas Thistlewood, who was a plantation overseer and slave-owner in Jamaica in the mid to late eighteenth century. His meticulous diary catalogues the horrific manner that he (and others) tortured and mutilated slaves. They did so with complete impunity. Soon after arriving in the colony he witnessed the body of a dead runaway being dug up and beheaded. Its head was placed on a pole as a warning and the body was burned to ash. Two years later he put the severed head of one of his own runaway slaves “upon a pole and stuck it up just at the angle of the road in the home pasture.” In 1766 he wrote how “2 of the Rebel Negroes were tried yesterday and one of them burnt with a slow fire (alive) ..” In Master, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World, Trevor Burnard writes of Thistlewood’s “willingness to subject his slaves to horrific punishments, which included savage whippings of up to 350 lashes and sadistic tortures of his own invention, such as Derby’s dose, in which a slave defecated into the mouth of another slave whose mouth was then wired shut ..” They reveal Thistlewood “as a brutal sociopath” who “accepted common Jamaican understandings that whites could act toward blacks in any way they wanted with impunity. Whites had total license to behave toward slaves as they saw fit, with white juries excusing all white crimes toward blacks short of psychopathic serial murder.”

Where does this ahistorical claim originate?

It is clear that To Hell or Barbados (Brandon Press 2000) by Sean O’Callaghan is largely responsible for fostering the belief that indentured servants suffered the exact same punishments as enslaved Africans. This book fails to differentiate between slaves and servants over one hundred times. Yes, I actually counted. O’Callaghan encouraged the growth of this myth by (purposefully?) deceiving the reader. In one section he uses William Dickson’s late-eighteenth century account of the torture of slaves to fallaciously describe how Irish servants were treated in Barbados in the mid-seventeenth century. In another (see below) he introduces the laws that governed indentured servants in Jamaica. But the second paragraph refers to enslaved Africans only, so unless the reader is familiar with the various slave codes or Hans Sloane’s account they will be left with
the impression that white servants suffered the same fate. In this case, being burned alive.

In any case. This mattered little when they reached Jamaica. The laws regarding bondsmen were as severe, if not more so, than those governing Barbados or America.

In An Act for Regulating Servants there are the following provisions: “All Servants shall have according to their Contract and Indenture, but where there is no Contract or Indenture, Servants under Eighteen Years of Age at their Arrival in this Island shall serve seven years, and above Eighteen Years of Age shall Serve Four Years, and all Convicted Felons for time of their Banishment.” The act also laid down other stipulations; any manservant marrying without the master’s or mistress’s consent was to serve two extra years. (It is difficult to see how any marriage could take place as there were only a few priests on the island at the time, and they were Spanish and in hiding with the Maroons.) There were also the usual clauses about runaways and the striking of a master or overseer, which followed the practice in Barbados.

A runaway, when captured, was soundly flogged and lost an ear. In addition, for each attempt an extra year was added to his indenture. A persistent runaway was hanged on the plantation as a warning to others. For striking a master or overseer or rebellion, the punishment was death by burning. Sir Hans Sloane, who visited Jamaica between 1687 and 1689, described this punishment in his book A Voyage to the Islands (1707): “The punishment of crimes of slaves for Rebellion is by burning them. They are nailed to the ground with crooked sticks on every limb and then applying the fire by degrees from the feet, burning them gradually up to the head, whereby their pains are extravagant.”
This is laughably bad history, but it has inspired a seriously dangerous mythology. Inevitably this awful historical writing is drawn upon to enhance the horror in the “Irish slaves” meme.

I recently noticed that an Irish member on Stormfront (sadly using an Easter Lily avi) posted a glowing review of To Hell or Barbados in 2005. This review was authored by Matthew Downing, a contributor to the National Vanguard website. National Vanguard is the online propaganda wing of the National Alliance Neo-Nazi organisation. The Southern Poverty Law Centre state that the National Alliance was once the “most dangerous and best organised neo-Nazi formation in America.” Its founder William
Pierce (author of *The Turner Diaries*) influenced the Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh.

Downing’s review contains all the old white supremacist tropes and myths à la *The Birth of a Nation*, as repeated and endorsed in O’Callaghan’s book.

“It is even less known that Irish slaves in the West Indies were in fact treated comparably worse than Black slaves... [it was] actually common practice for Black and Mulatto slaves to be given privileged positions of authority over these unfortunate Irish. The Black overseers frequently mistreated them and subjected these enchained Irish to severe physical violence. White, female slaves were also regularly subjected to violent rape by their overseers, as well as other degrading forms of sexual abuse...”

**Conclusion**

Christopher Tomlins in *Freedom Unbound: Law, Labor, and Civic Identity in Colonizing English America, 1580–1865* (2010) wrote “though the tendency to link the colonial institution of indentured servitude to that of slavery as variations on the same phenomenon of legalized bondage produces valuable insights into both, to analogize the restraints applied for periods of time to comparatively small numbers of white people to the permanent and absolute subjection of multitudes of Africans is of limited utility.”

He then quotes David Eltis who said that although a “coercive element in labour loomed large on both sides of the Atlantic in the seventeenth century...chattel slavery was always perceived as different.”

It should give us pause that modern-day Neo-Nazis and White Nationalists find great utility in equating indentured servitude and perpetual hereditary chattel slavery. Their public boasting about this derailment tactic reveals and echoes what they blatantly wish to obscure. The history of five centuries of dehumanization and oppression of black people in the Americas...and its poisonous legacy. Destructive, malignant racism: latent, overt and structural.

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