

“It bears terrifying witness to what happened to everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket. The price was to become “white.” No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country.”

“And they have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion, because they think they are white. Because they think they are white, they do not dare confront the ravage and the lie of their history. Because they think they are white, they cannot allow themselves to be tormented by the suspicion that all men are brothers. Because they think they are white, they are looking for, or bombing into existence, stable populations, cheerful natives and cheap labor. Because they think they are white, they believe, as even no child believes, in the dream of safety.”

James Baldwin, in *On Being White and Other Lies*

i.

Omagh, Northern Ireland, Summer 2017. A white, heterosexual couple from a southern U.S. state, come to look up the man’s great grandfather, or great uncle. The two of them entered the Centre for Migration Studies with an ambling confidence, gripping *The Name*, and their lot of ideas about who had born it and what it meant. One of two research librarians, Christine, walked towards them, cheery. *They told us in that museum that you would help us*, the white man said to her. He was large, greying. Both he and his wife wore hats.

I knew I was watching a cycle. How many times had these modern Irish women fielded such inquiries? Millions? Thousands? *It’s always Americans*, Christine would tell me later. Always Americans, flying to Ireland in droves, to Scotland, to England, buying family crests and claddagh rings, skimming their fingers down passenger lists looking for *The Name*. White faces, green money, flat a’s, knocking on the door. Just like me.

Excuse me, we say. Can you tell me who I am? Or who I want to say I am? Who I’m not?

How about this book? Christine asked them. *Catholic or Protestant, did yuh say?* The topic of slavery entered the conversation. Had their name been attached to a plantation? *Possibly*, the white American man said, looking unconcerned, *though so far it’s inconclusive*. His wife leaned next to him, validating him as he spoke. *That’s true. Aunt Margaret told us that over dinner few months back.*

I sat at a neighboring table, my headphones in, watching the two of them out of the corner of my eye, feeling repulsion and a sense of false superiority. *That’s not me*, I promised myself, lying.

Do you know where I could look at passenger lists? I asked Christine. *I’m looking for Susan Kelly and James Duncan.*

Protestant or Catholic? She asked me.

The assignment was to read the novel *Mrs. Bridge*, by Evan S. Connell. Six or more months after my trip to Ireland, I was back in school, taking a revision writing workshop with Rattawut Lapcharoensap, whom the students all call A. As I began *Mrs. Bridge*, I was initially unimpressed. Why did I care about this rich, white, hesitant woman who didn't know how to access her feelings or her desires? *Pathologically non-confrontational*, we would call Mrs. Bridge during our discussion.

As I read further, I started to feel the novel needling at my own self and family images. I discovered I did care, but I wasn't fully clear about why. It took our class discussion for me to understand why the work had gotten under my skin.

Mrs. Bridge reminds me of my mother, I said to the class.

Mrs. Bridge reminds me of my worst self, I didn't say to the class.

A whiteness, a femininity, a material comfort, a silence eating itself. A pointed towards Mrs. Bridge's racism, the harm she enacted through an embodied active refusal. Anne, a white student, spoke up in Mrs. Bridge's defense. *But she was conditioned to be silent*, she said. *Society taught her that, taking away her agency* —

I cut her off there, a bad habit of mine. *I disagree*, I said. *Someone can be conditioned and still have agency, right?* She blinked at me. *If we excuse racist, as well as other oppressive, behaviors on the basis of conditioning, where will we end up?* I sensed that she felt attacked. A heard us both, offering in return that the question of agency was a live one. *Was her agency gone?* He asked us. *Did she feel her agency was gone, which, in a way, took her agency?*

The question of agency starts to overlap a little bit with the question of intention, here. Could Mrs. Bridge help it, or not? Did she *mean* it, or not? The harm is still the harm. Who is accountable?

~

What's the earliest memory you have of being bad or feeling like you were bad?

I have been undergoing EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) therapy for the past year, starting in August, one month after I returned from Ireland to my home in Laramie, Wyoming. The EMDR process enables a person to reexamine traumatic memories, retraining the brain to not qualify that memory as trauma or painful.

My mother was very angry and very scared, I told my therapist, Emily, recounting a very early memory. *I remember her kneeling in front of me. I remember understanding that I had done something both wrong and scary.*

Children don't have the emotional maturity or brain development to know the difference between someone is scared and I am scary, Emily offers. *Your mother transferred her fear to you.*

For as long as I can remember, I have had a pathological fear of almost everything. Myself, illness, fatness, the future, the past, now, drinking, being hurt and left, hurting and leaving others, my own emotions, my own needs, sex, sin, desire, death... devil possession... mold... people not texting back. All of it.

Since this conversation with Emily, I've been thinking about how fear, habits of silence, histories, ghosts, hierarchies, oppression, entitlement, identities, and deflection get transferred interpersonally and culturally.

That I absorbed my mother's fear is unfortunate, but not pitiable. I have hurt myself and others with my actions born from a hypervigilance and a constant, dictating fear. Isn't it up to me to heal? Aren't I still accountable, regardless of where it came from?

~

Christine moved to my table. *I found this article*, she said, *perhaps it'll suit yuh?* The article was from an Irish newspaper; it was a series of interviews with Irish Americans living in the States who spoke lovingly of their Irish pride. During the interviews, each interviewee was asked a question about the political or even geographical state of Ireland. Almost every time, the Irish American interviewee got the questions about their supposed homeland wrong. I cringed. I too, knew very little about Ireland, Northern Ireland, or Irish history. I, too, however embarrassing, had felt something like pride when I bought a shamrock pin and pinned it to my backpack. Why?

ii.

In my first semester of my Creative Writing MFA, I applied for a travel grant from the Social Justice Research Center on the University of Wyoming Campus. My project proposal was both simple and lofty: I would travel to Ireland and trace, from Ireland, my family's migration to what's known as the U.S. and their subsequent whitening. In preparation, I'd read Baldwin's *Stranger in the Village* and *On White and Other Lies*. I'd read both Noel Ignatiev and David Roediger's histories of the white working class and how white people embraced an identity that was solely predicated on being better than Black and Brown people, in so doing solidifying whiteness as violence, a weapon of hierarchy, of death. I learned that groups like the Irish, Italians and Jewish people among others had all been categorized as *other* when they first arrived on this continent. Over time they managed to replace their othering through actively othering those considered less than even them: they became white. My ancestors had unquestionably done the same. I was proof. Could I personalize it, artistically? I would try. *I will write a creative nonfiction essay*, I told the SJRC in my proposal. I received the grant.

David Roediger writes, *Instead of accepting what James Baldwin called the "lie of whiteness," many people in lots of different fields and movement activities have tried to productively make it into a problem. When did (some) people come to define themselves as white? In what conditions? How does the lie of whiteness get reproduced? What are its costs politically, morally and*

*culturally?*¹ Is there a reason why I can't accept whiteness as a lie and as Roediger says, *productively make it a problem?*

~

While I wandered throughout the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland during my ten day trip, I conducted most of my research in Northern Ireland at the Mellon Centre for Migration Studies, which is part of the Ulster American Folk Park.

The Ulster American Folk Park is one of Northern Ireland's National Museums. Located in Omagh, which is in what is now known as Northern Ireland, the museum includes an immersive learning experience. There are traditional exhibits about the Irish migration to what's known as the U.S., but the Ulster American Folk Park is also comprised of a large assortment of impressive buildings and structures — including a full passenger ship replica — that accurately represent historical houses, towns, and other buildings in Ireland *and* what's known as the U.S. at the time of migration. The Folk Park's mission is to give those seeking historical information about Irish migration the opportunity to, in a respect "live it" — or at least literally trace it with their footsteps as they walk through the full, sprawling, park.

Next to the Ulster American Folk Park sits the Mellon Centre for Migration Studies, a library and archive dedicated to promoting the study and acquisition of information on Irish migration, as well as family ancestry (though they make a firm point on their website that they are *not* a genealogy service). The research librarians (one of whom was Christine) at the Mellon Centre won't do any of the tracing work *for* you, but if you have the name of your ancestor and some other information about them, (such as the township they lived in, whether your ancestor was Protestant or Catholic, when the ancestor left Ireland or when they arrived in what's known as the U.S.), they will give you a lot of books to read and databases to search. I had emailed Christine, a research librarian at the centre, months before my trip, so she knew to expect me. She was enthusiastic and supportive, even if she didn't fully understand my project. Honestly, to some degree, we had that in common.

So yuh're studying... Irish and American whiteness, and the links? Christine asked. *Yes*, I said. *And*, I added, *I'm interested in studying and learning how Irish people might racially identify themselves ... um, like now.* She looked at me, puzzled and suspicious. *Are yuh asking me if I identify as white?* *Sure*, I said. She nodded, as if she understood my question, but didn't answer.

~

Upon hearing about my project, a dear Filipina-American friend of mine, Kristine, wisely cautioned me against fetishizing my European ancestry. She referenced a Sara Ahmed quote about the dangers of using ancestry to escape one's culpability and complicity in whiteness. *Ruth Frankenberg has argued that if whiteness is emptied out of any content other than that which is associated with racism or capitalism 'this leaves progressive whites apparently without any*

¹ *Working Towards Whiteness*, Roediger.

genealogy' (1993, 232). *The implication of her argument is in my view unfortunate. It assumes the subjects of Whiteness Studies are 'progressive whites', and that the task of Whiteness Studies is to provide such subjects with a genealogy. In other words, whiteness studies would be about making 'anti-racist' whites feel better, as it would restore to them a positive identity.*²

I needed the reminder. I am utterly guilty of fetishizing my European ancestry. It's easy to reach into the shops of Belfast and pull out shamrock earrings, Celtic symbols, keychains with The Name or The Names that link me to another country. It felt like a kind of salvation. This, I imagine, is exactly what Ahmed is pointing her finger at.

The lie of whiteness. Because they believe they are white. It is a lie, like Baldwin tells us over and over, but it's also a recognized signifier. Even if I stop believing I'm white, if I start saying I am Irish, or Scotch Irish, or European American — I'll still be seen and treated as white, benefiting from white supremacy. What is the role, then, of connecting to one's European ancestry? What can it give me that isn't erasure or deflection?

~

I'll go to Ireland, I told the SJRC, and I'll write about my family's white becoming. I will apply Roediger's questions directly to my own personal history. The *how?* was fuzzy. To a large degree, I assumed this how would become apparent upon arrival, that I would trace "it" (migration? racialization? my own subjectivized history?) with my footsteps. *I have no idea what I'm doing, I told Annie.*

iii.

For the first half of my trip to both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (*it's all Ireland*, a Catholic Irish man I met firmly told me, his mouth a line), Annie traveled with me. She had some trouble getting into the country, however. Apparently, although Ireland and NI have no strict requirements regarding passport expiration dates (other than that it cannot be expired upon entry), Iceland, the country we would have a short layover in, had different rules. Iceland required that passports be good for more than six months beyond the day we'd be entering the country. To our dismay, Annie's passport was only good for just under that, so because Iceland would deny her entry, she wasn't allowed to board the plane in the States. We found this out as I was waiting at the gate, expecting her to join me. The phone call, a rock in my stomach. She had to buy an entirely new plane ticket last minute, a rock in hers.

Complaining about the situation on Facebook as I waited in a Dublin hostel for Annie to arrive a day later, I was instantly humbled by a friend's comment. *I had the worst time getting into Ireland*, Ana Paula, a Black queer woman from Brazil commented on my post. *They asked me so many questions, doubting who I was and whether or not my passport was legal. It took forever. They were really rude.* She went on to explain she'd heard similar stories from other Black friends of hers about Irish customs. Later, a woman I'd couchsurf told me similar stories she'd

² http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm

heard, too. When did Ireland, I wondered, become white to the point of embracing this kind of globalized anti-Blackness? How?

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I found explaining my project difficult to explain to the Irish people I met. This was less because they didn't understand the project (though this happened occasionally), and more often because I preemptively assumed they wouldn't, which affected my ability to talk about the work openly.

Sometimes, I'd fumble into saying my project was about how white people, in both Ireland and what's known as the U.S., reckon with racism, which is only sort of true.

Other times, I'd say I was studying Irish ethnicity, which was even less true.

What was I afraid of?

One such conversation came up when I was speaking to an employee in a Dublin youth hostel, my second day in the country. It was very early in the morning. I needed to use the phone to make a reservation for a hostel in Belfast, the next city Annie and I were headed to after Dublin. The employee was a stringy, over enthusiastic man with orange blonde hair. *What brings yuh t'Ireland?* Feeling more open and impulsive than I would the rest of the trip, I answered him clearly and fully.

Have yuh seen this movie clip? He asked in response, naming a movie title I didn't recognize. I said no. He brought up the video clip on youtube. In it, a group of characters laugh about how Irish people are *the Black people of Europe*. Aren't there already Black people in Europe? I wondered. This clip reminded me of a Bjork quote I'd heard, where she said that *women were the n-word of the world*. (What about Black women, then, Bjork?) Is there anything more explicitly anti-Black than these kinds of comparisons, this kind of hierarchy?

Later, Andy would poke at my analysis here. *It sounds like you're imposing a U.S. understanding of race on other cultures*, he warned me. Of course, other countries have their own valuable histories and relationships to race. *Ireland*, Andy writes, *has a complex history of being the staging ground for the colonial expansion which would serve as precursor to colonial projects that brought slavery to the Western hemisphere*. And slavery in the U.S., according to the historical and critical race scholarship I've read, is directly connected the U.S. creating whiteness and Blackness, as well as coining the nword slur itself. How much, then are other countries, is Ireland, using *our* understanding of race? Or how much of our *global intimacies* (a phrase coined by scholar Lisa Lowe) with other countries have factored into the construction of race over time?

None of this negates that Irish people *do* still experience discrimination, and have, historically.

There is a reason that joke, albeit offensive, resonated with Irish people.

After showing me this clip, the man at the hostel recounted a story when he was referred to as a *Mick* in Australia.

It felt bad, he said with a pause, as if he was still a little even confused about his own reaction.

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Annie and I were told that in many places in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland flag is forbidden outright. Realizing their importance, we made sure to notice which flags were flown where.

In Dublin, which is in The Republic of Ireland, Irish pride seemed to be synonymous with Catholic pride. The green, white, and orange flag flew on every street corner, in front of every shop, at every street light. But in Northern Ireland, Union Jack flags, synonymous with Protestantism and English rule, were absolutely everywhere. The tension between Ireland & Catholicism and Britain & Protestantism was thick in Northern Ireland. Under a practical rainbow of Union Jacks, Gaelic graffiti and murals filled the sides of buildings, demanding the Gaelic language be taught in schools. Comparisons filled my mind, but were they fair?

What link could be made, I wondered to Native groups in countries like Canada or New Zealand demanding that their children be taught the Native language?

Honestly, this is a little strange, Annie told me. I'm so used to white people being the clear oppressors. Here, people whom we would race white are, and have, openly oppressed each other.

~

Despite knowing religion is not the same as race, and that ethnicity is not the same as race, while traveling in Ireland, my mind kept nagging me about the divide between Protestants and Catholics. Was this a racialized divide? Could comparisons be made to the color line that were fair, that didn't negate or devalue other struggles?

My instinct, though not certain, is no. That this divide is deeply important to the country's history, but that it is not a *racial* divide. But I don't seem to be the only person asking these question or making comparisons between the Irish Catholic struggle and other racialized occupier-occupied conflicts.

Throughout the Republic of Ireland, in Catholic corners of Northern Ireland, and in Derry, Northern Ireland, Palestinian flags were flown next to the flag of the Irish Republic. It became increasingly clear Irish Catholics felt, and were expressing, a powerful solidarity between themselves and the Palestinians as two occupied groups, and perhaps even as two racially oppressed groups, though that was less clear as it was more an open question in my conversations with Annie. Annie and I acknowledged that we honestly didn't know enough about it.

What was the role of race in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, anyway? The Movement for Black Lives has expressed solidarity with the plight of Palestinians. If Palestinians saw their flags next to the Irish ones, what would they think? Would they agree with the comparison? Are Irish

Republic flags flown in Palestine?

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You Are Now Entering Free Derry, read a broad, bold sign overlooking a green park in Derry, a walled city in Northern Ireland city known for its rebellion against British rule. In the center of the park, a gorgeous lily sculpture stood proudly; a symbol, we would learn, of support for the Catholic side of the conflict.

Although I'm not Catholic, and I'm barely Protestant, I had an urge to buy something in Derry with a lily on it. I chalked this up to the fact that I usually, based on my values, support the occupied, and not the occupier.

I confess, I'm rooting for the Catholics, I told Annie, *but I still barely know anything about the conflict at all. So is that fair? Probably not*, she told me, *but I get it. I feel the same way*.

Later, I'd tell my ancestral story to an Irish person. *Protestant and Catholic, huh? English and Irish?* They shook their head, bemused. *The oppressed and the oppressor, in one family? Funny world*. I considered my U.S. citizenship, my whiteness, my class privilege. *Oh*, I told them, *you don't know the half of it*.

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I saw almost zero Black and Brown people in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Both *felt* like white spaces, white countries, territories. But did the citizens call themselves white? Did it matter? Could a space *feel* white even if Irish people don't identify as white? What does that say about whiteness, and the role it plays?

When I had gone through customs, it took all of one minute, shorter even than getting back into what's known as the States, my actual home. *Where are you from?* The man behind the glass asked me, smiling, his Irish accent thick. *The States*, I told him. *What are you doing here? Just visiting for fun*, I told him, opting not to mention my research project for simplicity's sake. *Have a great trip*, he said, handing back my passport, still smiling.

How was customs? I asked Annie, when she finally greeted me in the hostel, sleep deprived but excited, pulling her suitcase behind her. *It was nothing*, she said, shaking her head, bewildered. *Like three seconds of conversation, max*.

iv.

When Christine found out my last name was Duncan, she suggested I talk to an older Irish woman who was currently playing a historical character, in full period garb, in one of the homes in the Ulster American Folk Park. *I'll take yuh t'see her*, Christine said.

Surely, this woman was not a relative of mine. Or was she? How could I know? She was, I reminded myself, a Duncan that lived in Omagh, Northern Ireland, after all. And I had visited Omagh because Omagh was in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, which was the county my father had told me our family was from. I would come to find out, only after arriving in Omagh, that County Tyrone was an extremely large county, and Omagh was only one of many towns within the county. Still, Omagh had the museum, as well as the Centre for Migration Studies, so it had seemed as good a place as any to start.

A kindly looking woman in her mid-sixties, wearing a dress and bonnet, with reddish brown hair, and wide, sloping white, moled, face. I felt a weird kinship with her, even while I knew this was laughable. She curiously smiled up at me after I introduced myself. *Christine, from the Mellon Centre, sent me*, I told her. *...Because we have the same last name*. She continued to smile, waiting. What else was I supposed to say?

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Can I tell you something fun? I'd usually begin. This has been my go-to small talk party joke for the last fifteen years. *My first name, Sarah, means Princess. My last name, Duncan, means warrior. So, I'd continue, but by that point they'd usually have caught on, I'm a Warrior Princess. Like Xena?* They'd laugh. *Exactly.*

Despite what kind of ass kicking I may or may not do in my fantasies, I am nothing like Xena. I am unquestionably Gabriel. Emotional? Yes. Passionate? Yes. Spunky? Depends on if I've slept. Impulsive? Oh God yes. Willing to literally up and leave her entire life to follow around a woman she both wants to be and also (even if she doesn't know it yet) wants to sleep with? That was me in High School.

The name Duncan actually means "Brown Warrior" or in another translation, "Brown-haired Chieftain." The name comes from the Gaelic name Donnchadh.

"Brown Warrior" and "Brown-haired Chieftain" are very different. I can't be the former, and if you met me, you'd agree. I once had a photographer tell me I was literally the whitest, palest, damn near translucent person he had ever photographed in his entire professional career.

I can't really be a "Brown-haired Chieftain" either. While my hair is brown, I am no chieftain; definition — captain, ruler, head. I head up an English class and I lead organizing workshops sometimes, but that's the extent of my leadership. And, as someone who's grown up in what's known as the U.S. on the North American continent, the word "chieftain" brings up more native and Indigenous associations than I imagine (?) it might for Irish people.

The name is Scottish in origin, though it can also be attached to Irish people. It is likely that I am not simply "Irish" but "Scotch-Irish." *Were your ancestors Protestant or Catholic? Both*, I'd reply. *Duncan is a Scottish name*, they'd say. *And it's a Protestant name. Why not go to Scotland? Why are you in Ireland?*

~

After I'd returned back to what's known as the States, I would tell my Grandmother Duncan, whom I have grown up calling Nana, about this woman I met, the woman who shared our name. Nana was very interested, although truth be told, there wasn't much of a story to it. (Or perhaps, the story was in all that we couldn't reach, all the blanks that couldn't possibly ever be filled in).

The Irish Duncan woman told me she was *a Duncan by marriage*; it wasn't her maiden name. She was proud to have married into the Duncans. Even though she'd been Catholic, she had no problem marrying a Protestant. She jutted out her chin when she said this, as if anticipating pushback.

Was your family in the States Protestant or Catholic?

Protestant now, I told her.

What about your ancestors? She asked.

Both, I answered.

She said what others would say throughout my trip: that Duncan was, originally, a Scottish name, and that it was also a Protestant name. I never knew what to say in those instances. I didn't disagree, of course. But I knew that my ancestor, James Duncan, *had* immigrated from County Tyrone in Ireland, not Scotland, to what's known as the U.S. So, too, had his later wife, Susan Kelly, was Catholic, had come over from Donegal County, also in Ireland.

Nana's maiden name is Boyle, a very Irish name. Yet, although I was able to discover passenger lists bearing the names of James Duncan (who was a contract laborer) and Susan Kelly (who was a servant of some kind), I was unable to learn much about the Boyles.

Regardless, I gave my Nana a few trinkets I picked up from Ireland. *I always had hoped to travel there*, she told me wistfully, turning over the gifts slowly in her hands. The moment, this exchange. It felt weighted, sentimental, foolish, and genuine all at once. What I had brought her were gift store wares, nothing bearing any real essence of her heritage. This was enough, though. She was pleased.

~

The story is family lore. When the Duncans Were Kicked Out of the Catholic Church.

The basic plot goes like this: two people, both with the last name Duncan, marry.

One of the Duncans is a Protestant. One of the Duncans is a Catholic.

Dun dun dun dun.

During the first year of their interreligious marriage, the Catholic Duncan secretly invited a Catholic priest to the house to baptize their newborn child into the Catholic religion. During the ad hoc ceremony, the Protestant Duncan happened to come home. Key in the door, scramble.

Too late! Caught in the act!

Seeing what was taking place, Protestant Duncan was furious. Protestant Duncan grabbed the Catholic priest by his collar and threw him, robe a-flapping, out of the house and into the snow. *The Duncans are excommunicated!*, cried the Catholic Priest from where he lay on the ground, framed in white, cold.

Apparently.

~

I suppose you could call the Catholic Diocese, my Dad offered when I asked him how I'd ever be able to verify this family legend. They'd probably be able to tell you if the story was true. I was highly skeptical of this.

Which Diocese? Where?

The one in Delaware maybe, he said. We have a lot of family there.

Well, this was true.

Yeah, okay, maybe.... I conceded, still doubtful. Do they really keep records that far back?

I heard the shrug in his voice. *Call and find out.*

I haven't called yet. I can't imagine that conversation being anything other than ridiculous. Which, honestly, is probably reason alone to make the call.

~

My travel in Ireland and Northern Ireland revealed to me that the kind of map I was seeking didn't exist. I could draw one from my imagination, but it would be just that: made up. I had to accept that any kind of supposed retracing I'd be able to do would be, ultimately, the same for most Irish American families. It would probably look like this.

Act Two: Scene Only

A podium.

Sarah walks on stage. (*What? She asks the reader, shrugging. Just because I stopped revising, that doesn't mean I threw out the theatrical device.*)

Sarah

Good morning. I need four volunteers to help me tell a simple story. Takers?

Four people volunteer.

Sarah

Thank you! Here. (*She passes out notecards with text on them to the four volunteers*). When I point to you, please read the card aloud. Sound good?

The four volunteers affirm that this does, indeed, sound good.

Volunteer One

Once upon a time, Irish people, came to what was at the time called the “New World.” Upon entry, we identified as Irish people. Quickly, though, we learned that Irish people were spat upon, discriminated against. *No dogs, No Irish.*

Volunteer Two

We looked around this so-called new world, noticing the class and racial hierarchies. *What other groups were discriminated against, particularly in the job market?* We asked ourselves. Our answers? Black people. Asian people. Native people, if we saw them at all.

Volunteer Three

Well, we said to each other. We're going to beat out all of these groups for jobs. We aren't going to be categorized alongside slaves. We're at least better than Black folks. In order to drive that point home to the upper class of people in this country (who were primarily also of European descent, mainly British) that were starting to call themselves “white,” we decided to put as much distance between us and the Black folk (who we had previously living alongside) as possible.

Volunteer Four

Over time, through weaponizing the rampant anti-Blackness happening at this time historically, we started to be referred to as white, too. We climbed the ranks in different professions. We were able to take higher paying working class jobs, the kind with a little more power and land than contract manual labor. With the land we acquired, we became farmers.

Sarah

The Duncan family particularly progressed from farmers to retail workers, hotel owners, clergy, military professionals, entrepreneurs, nurses, musicians. Other Irish Americans would go into politics and police work, explicitly taking positions of power that they wielded against Black local families and churches in scores of documented cases of violence, including church arson. Through acquiring land, money, and status as white people, the Duncan family would gain generational wealth, passing it on. We would aspire to, and ultimately attend and graduate from,

higher education in the humanities and the arts, solidifying our educational class power. We became Protestant, which distanced us from the “Fighting Irish” and “Dirty Irish” stereotypes, most of which were connected to Catholicism.

Volunteer One

We Irish no longer lived in the same housing areas as Black people.

Volunteer Two

We no longer fought Black people (or Asian people, or Latinx people) for manual labor jobs; we didn't need to.

Volunteer Three

We were the managers, the ones in charge of the unions -- not to mention the mayors and the cops.

Volunteer Four

We became white, American middle class citizens.

Sarah

And they all lived happily ever after.
Give yourself a round of applause!

End.

v.

A few minutes after I finished teaching my undergraduate students, my mother called me. Somehow, I knew before I picked up the phone. My Grandma Turner (not to be confused with my Nana, Grandma Duncan) would die today, and my mother wanted to let me know.

At the time of the phone call, my Grandmother Turner, my mother's mother, was in her 90s. Her husband, my mother's father, my Grandfather Turner died a few years ago. She had been living alone in a residential living center. *She's not in any pain*, I told my Mom, but I don't know how much comfort that gave her. *I have to go*, my Mom said. *I'm hopping on the plane now*. She was headed to Washington State from Illinois. She was sure she wouldn't make it in time to say goodbye.

~

My mother's side of the family, I've been told, came from predominantly Scotland and England, though there are a few Irish and French descendents, too. I know this because, unlike my Father's side of the family, one of my Turner relatives has compiled 1000+ pages of our family history into a giant white binder. I have the binder; it sits on a side table in my living room. I have only briefly perused it. I saw a lot of *Lady This* and *Lord That*. I was embarrassed by those titles. The story of Susan Kelly and James Duncan were that they were just that: only

Susan Kelly and James Duncan, working class people who did whatever jobs they could. When I think of Lords and Ladies, I think of a lot of partner dancing, jousting, and sitting around ordering others about. Of power.

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My Grandmother Turner, had she opted to adopt a British accent, would have had no trouble passing as an upper class British person. She was a tiny, delicate person, eating things only in halves. She wore discrete florals and a tight, passive cheerfulness. At blessed moments, she graced us with a bit of goofy, a bit of a wink wink after she'd murmured a quiet joke.

My memories are few. I barely knew her. I wonder how many people really did. For Christmas, she'd sent me a card that read: I care, these two words underlined. *Does she think I think she doesn't?* I'd wondered. And then, more honestly, I let myself admit internally that *of course* I thought she didn't. It was never a malicious belief. I never actively wanted her to care more, but I did in a lot of ways think she wasn't terribly concerned about the details of my life, as long as she knew I was alive and moving through the world.

After receiving the card, I'd called her to say hello, and we had the most genuine conversation I'd ever had with her. She asked me about my work, my research, my organizing. This was merely weeks before her death.

Hanging up the phone after hearing the news of her certain, and soon, death, I realized I was struggling with my own question. Did I care? Could I care? Was I afraid to?

I don't understand my reaction, I told my friend Sabrina, who called me later on to offer support. *I barely knew her. She was in her 90s. She didn't experience pain after she became unconscious.* What is there to be upset about, other than a sympathy for my own mother's pain?

There needs to be another word than love, I said. *Or word for the affection you feel for someone you're connected to by even the smallest amount of blood, but you don't really know.*

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It has since occurred to me that this feeling, and this lack of a satisfactory word for the feeling, is what pushes people to google their dead relatives, sketch names in the the limbs of family trees. I am glad I knew my Grandmother and Grandfather Turner, because they are a part of this large connected tangle of lives that helped produce mine, that will produce others. I loved them, but that love is rooted primarily in... well, roots.

I remember the spreading warmth I felt, looking at the older Irish woman at Ulster Folk Park, who had married into a Duncan family that may or may not be connected to mine. She was not my blood relative, but it didn't matter to my emotions. I felt a bud of the same feeling, this feeling of internal reaching for roots. *You, too?*

~

The fight against racism is our issue, said Anne Braden, a famous white racial justice activist. It's not something that we're called on to help People of Color with. We need to become involved with it as if our lives depended on it because really, in truth, they do.

I have heard variations on this sentiment over years that I've been involved in both racial justice activism and the study of whiteness. Much of the scholarship I've read on race, as well as on anti-racist organizing, will routinely assert that white supremacy hurts white people, too.

I always struggle a bit with these assertions, because true or not, to some degree the *this hurts white people too* seems like it should be beside the point. Any white pain, under white supremacy, is surely disproportionate to the pain of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, and surely disproportionate to the gross benefits white people receive. Baldwin describes a loss of humanity that is attached to whiteness.

So: white people may be less whole, less human, less connected, due to their subscription and adherence to the whiteness being sold them in society.

So: white people might have lost specificity of heritage through lumping themselves into the category of whiteness.

Yes, this seems true. But Black people also lost specificity of heritage in many ways, and, they're currently being mass incarcerated, killed, having to fight harder for housing, healthcare, grocery stores, and decent schools than I or other white people I know will ever have to, even if they're poor, even if they struggle in other ways. Can we agree that that's worse?

It's not a contest. But the disproportionate amount of suffering between races, this history of these becomings matter. We can hold both, all. But we can't conflate them.

~

After I returned home, I marveled at some of the pretense I had gone abroad with. How did I think I could trace something, when the two locations, the to and the from, are so vastly different than they were when Susan and James arrived and departed?

Which is to say, why didn't I anticipate that their footsteps would be gone?

I have the sense that Irish ethnicity cannot really be reclaimed in any authentic way without what's known as the U.S. reckoning with its own past, engaging in accountability processes and restorative justice with those most hurt. To look to my own countries of origin, without any of

that healing having taken place, is to search for a balm which ultimately, won't, can't last. It is nice to know a little more about my lineage, but it doesn't change anything for me. I can push back against the lie whiteness, but no matter how many shamrock bookmarks I buy, how much I unlearn, how many countries I visit, how many Baldwin books I read or Black Lives Matter buttons I wear, how many anti-oppression workshops I take, I am still a white American. I am working not to *think* of myself as white in the way Baldwin means. But that doesn't change what I am to the world.

I don't mourn my somewhat "lost" ancestry.
I know enough about what and who came before me.
I know who I want to be.

For now, that will be enough.