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Everything and Nothing: Myths of White Supremacy and "Irishness" in the Age of Trump

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Myths underpin all group identities. Understanding contemporary American socio-political upheaval requires examining how these myths inform ideology and identity, and how they work to orient communities towards political action. In recent years, white supremacy has formed (or re-formed) as one powerful rhetorical mythology. Examining this formation, I draw upon McGee's and Charland's essays regarding political mythmaking and constitutive rhetoric, Crockford's work in alt-right populism and white supremacy, and Kaufmann's research on white identity, nationalism, and voting behaviors. I then consider some of the ways Donald Trump's recent speeches tap into and utilize this mythology. I also critically investigate the "Irish"/ "Celtic" versions of white supremacy and how the rhetoric of white supremacy appropriates popular myths, symbols, and memories of Irish America, at times doing so in service of Trump's political agenda. Finally, I offer a contribution to the greater rhetorical and social discussion, arguing against merely attempting to counter "regressive" with "progressive" mythmaking, but also arguing for encouraging critical thought and for empathetic engagement with ideological others.

Keywords: constitutive rhetoric; Donald Trump; myth; nationalism; white supremacy

All group identities are underpinned by *myths*. Understanding contemporary American socio-political upheaval and acrimony (in great part the result of competing myths, identities, and visions for a future America) requires an examination of how myths inform ideology and identity, and how they work to orient communities towards political action. Working towards this understanding, I first establish a theoretical foundation that draws from Michael McGee's and Maurice Charland's seminal essays regarding political mythmaking and constitutive rhetoric. Many disparate factors compose our unique socio-political moment – the rise of Donald Trump-style populism; a global pandemic; widespread protests, counter-protests, and riots in response to racial disparities and police brutality; rapid demographic shifts and globalization. Partly in response to this moment, white supremacy has formed (or re-formed) as one powerful rhetorical mythology. To help illuminate this process, I rely upon Susannah Crockford's work in alt-right populism and white supremacy and political scientist Eric Kaufmann's research on white identity, nationalism, and voting behaviors. I then consider some of the ways in which Donald Trump's speeches (including an example from a February 2024 rally in South Carolina) tap into and utilize this mythology.

I also critically investigate how the rhetoric of modern white supremacy appropriates and adapts the myths, symbols, and memories of Irish America, at times in service of Trump's political agenda. According to Diane Negra, "Irishness" was "the most marketable white ethnicity in

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late-twentieth-century American culture"[1] and since then has only continued to grow in recognition and marketability. Some white supremacist groups have capitalized upon this cultural and marketplace popularity, borrowing recognition and reputability to advance racist agendas in attempts to legitimize a white "Celtic" political mythology. Next, I turn to examine the particularly Irish varietal of white supremacy discussed in essays by Negra, Natasha Casey, and Catherine Eagan in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture* and the broader concept of "Celticism" explored in James McCarthy and Euan Hague's "Race, Nation, and Nature." I then conclude by offering a contribution to the greater rhetorical and social discussion, arguing against merely attempting to counter "regressive" with "progressive" mythmaking or with "reason," but also arguing for encouraging critical thought and for empathetic engagement with ideological others.

Myth and Constitutive Rhetoric

"Myths" are essentially the narratives and the stories that humans tell themselves (and one another) about themselves and their world.[2] For individuals and communities, myths provide ways to order and understand often opaque and frequently dangerous natural and social environments. They offer a kind of schema, or interpretive context, in which these individuals and communities can form and refine ideologies. These ideologies form the basis not only of religious beliefs or ethical codes but ultimately of most actions taken in the material world. In a series of interviews transcribed in Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers's *The Power of Myth*, Campbell explains how myths relate to one's relationship with one's environment: "When the story is in your mind, then you see its relevance to something happening in your own life".[3] In practice, myths are typically not consciously perceived as mythological in the "fictional" sense, but rather form the very context in which one experiences life and assigns meaning *to* experience. This usage of myth builds and elaborates upon the classical Greek concept of *mythos* as a "story that nearly everyone in a community knows that serves as a reference point for community values and behavior."[4] Here, "myth" also encompasses Susan Jarratt's proposed concept of *nomos* (or "custom-law"), "the unwritten social rules, expectations, and values of a local community concerning behavior, responsibilities, boundaries, rights and other social customs."[5] Myths are more than commonly-known stories or fictions. Myths are the very frameworks on which communities and societies are negotiated and constructed.

Successful *political* myths involving ethnicity and nationhood – which significantly impact group identity, intercommunal relationships, nation-building, and so on – rhetorically succeed because they provide to their adherents something psychologically fundamental. As Kaufmann posits in his "White Identity and Ethno-Traditional Nationalism in Trump's America," "ethnicity

1. Diane Negra, "Irishness, Innocence, and American Identity Politics before and after September 11," in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 355.
2. In certain contexts a "myth" may refer to a specific and popularly-known story, while in others the term denotes a falsehood or fiction. For the purposes of this paper, I borrow McGee's and Charland's usage; sometimes they use the term in places where "fiction" or "narrative" might suffice, but frequently the term carries a greater weight as a kind of foundational narrative with significant implications for shaping worldviews.
3. Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Double Day, 1988), 2.
4. John R. Edlund, "A Sophistic Pattern of Persuasion," *Teaching Text Rhetorically* (blog), January 9, 2020, https://textrhet.com/2020/01/09/sophistic-appeals-mythos-logos-nomos/.
5. Edlund, "A Sophistic Pattern of Persuasion."

and nationhood are far more than political phenomena – they are also cultural and psychological."[6] To make sense of the power and resilience of myths and ideologies (including white supremacy) in our time, we need a basic understanding of how political myths function and how they adapt to changing circumstances.

First, mythmaking is a dynamic process, at both individual and community levels, and identity itself resists stasis. As humans interact with others and experience various environmental or economic pressures, their ideologies and identities can shift. Charland discusses these shifts in the context of political myths, observing in his essay "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*" that "populations can at different historical moments gain different identities that warrant different forms of collective life"[7] and "various contradictory subject positions can simultaneously exist within a culture: we can live within many texts."[8] Ideologies may adapt if they can cohabit with complementary or competing ideologies, or they may give way entirely to new ideologies that better serve the populations holding to them. An identity that makes sense in one historical moment may quickly become anachronistic, or even unrecognizable, in the next. In their essay analyzing the rhetoric of "Celticism" employed by white supporters of the Wise Use movement, "Race, Nation, and Nature: The Cultural Politics of 'Celtic' Identification in the American West," McCarthy and Hague posit that identity functions less as a static descriptor and more in ways that are "constructed, changeable, fragmented, and often internally contradictory."[9] As such, caution should be used when describing populations or ideologies as though they are unitary and unchanging (though, as Charland also notes, effective constitutive rhetoric often describes "the people" exactly in such a way, a function explored in more depth later in this article).

According to McGee, one reason that political myths resist easy definition (and rational argumentation), is that they often appeal more to one's emotions and sense of aesthetics than to one's logic. Myths "defy empirical or historical treatment," he argues in his "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative," because they function "rhetorically as ontological arguments relying not so much on evidence as on artistic proofs intended to answer the question, What is 'real'?"[10] For McGee, when an "advocate" (perhaps a politician, a philosopher, or another rhetorician) proposes a "people," they propose "an idea of collective force which transcends both individuality and reason."[11] The "people" exist as a kind of political myth, one that gains concrete reality as the rhetorical audience agrees to participate in a "collective fantasy."[12] McGee posits that this agreement results from competing and contrary "stable" and "vital" impulses within an individual – the one "to credit the lessons of the past forced upon us in the socialization process" and the other "to credit our own 'root feeling in the presence of life' regardless of social dicta."[13]

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6. Eric Kaufmann, "White Identity and Ethno-Traditional Nationalism in Trump's America," *The Forum* 17, no. 3 (2019): 390.
7. Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 136.
8. Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 142.
9. James McCarthy and Euan Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature: The Cultural Politics of 'Celtic' Identification in the American West," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94, no. 2 (2004): 388.
10. Michael C. McGee, "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61, no. 3 (1975): 244.
11. McGee, "In Search of 'The People,'" 238.
12. McGee, "In Search of 'The People,'" 240.
13. McGee, "In Search of 'The People,'" 246.

Kaufmann also nods to how this interpellation functions in subconscious or emotional ways, claiming that – in contrast with critical race theory's understanding of *power* as the prime driver of ethnic attachment or nationhood – these actually stem "from affective bonds to symbols, myths and memories."[14] Charland argues that the process of accepting a myth and entering into a new subject position should be understood less as persuasion, and more as a "conversion that ultimately results in an act of recognition of the 'rightness' of a discourse" and of one's own identity with respect to this new position; the new identifications can be spontaneous, intuitive, and even unconscious.[15] Campbell presents this idea more poetically, claiming that by adhering to and participating in a myth, "we're seeking…an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality."[16] There may be rational components to these conversions, but they are also driven by affective and "religious" impulses.

Myths' affective power varies from population to population and individual to individual, but ultimately, any unified group identity relies upon it. Charland theorizes how political myths offer what he calls a "consubstantiality" between the living and the dead: a positing of a "transhistorical subject" that transcends physical and temporal limitations.[17] Political myths allow individuals to feel that they exist as a part of something larger than themselves – a sensation which lies at the heart of all social life, and both transcends and builds upon the tangible physical advantages that community provides. These myths work to answer McGee's primordial question: "What is real?" Kaufmann argues that for individuals, the "key psychological features" that underpin ethnic and national identity are "the quest for meaning, belonging and continuity of existence beyond one's own life."[18] These underpinnings interconnect, and successful political myths provide answers to all these desires, including this sense of continuity of existence. Novel myths of national or community life can be difficult to successfully promote, without first establishing a convincing rhetorical connection to the *past* that can be shown to bear relevance to the *present*. Effective political myths (and many effective politicians) rely upon this successful temporal linkage. Political psychologist Kevin McNicholl claims in his article "How the 'Northern Irish' National Identity Is Understood and Used by Young People and Politicians" that "the power, authority, and authenticity of the nation is in large part derived from it[s] perception as ancient and unchanging."[19] Common traditions, rituals, and laws can help reinforce and codify such a perception, but the perception itself appeals to something psychologically deeper than the mere comfort of habit. Trump's popular "Make America Great Again" campaign slogan explicitly relies on this past-present linkage. In his speeches he regularly courts his supporters' emotional sense of the "ancient and unchanging" nation and their place in it, telling them that in regard to their political opponents, "you must never forget this nation does not belong to them. This nation belongs to you. This is your home. This is your heritage. Our American liberty is your God-given right."[20] Trump casts the nation as his supporters' divinely ordained home and heritage, appealing to their desire for transcendent meaning and belonging.

14. Kaufmann, "White Identity," 389.
15. Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 142 and 133.
16. Campbell and Moyers, *Power of Myth*, 4.
17. Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 140.
18. Kaufmann, "White Identity," 390.
19. Kevin McNicholl, Clifford Stevenson, and John Garry, "How the 'Northern Irish' National Identity Is Understood and Used by Young People and Politicians," *Political Psychology* 40, no. 3 (2019): 502.
20. Donald Trump, "Speech in Conway, South Carolina" (speech, Conway, SC, February 10, 2024).

Campbell notes that one of the functions of myth generally is "a sociological one – supporting and validating a certain social order,"[21] and McGee argues that in fact any collective identity depends upon "the people's" belief in common myths. Myths "function as a means of providing social unity and collective identity," and more: the communities themselves, or "'the people' *are* the social and political myths they accept."[22] Again, myths and identities are inherently dynamic, and any worthwhile analysis must contextualize heavily. Even within a generally unified community, individuals can articulate their sense of collective identity in varying ways. In the context of the "Northern Irish" national identity, McNicholl posits that individuals can understand identity either "as a distinctive people, as an 'identity claim' that may be disingenuous, as a 'banal' marker of place, and as a 'hot' political project."[23] This points to the complex task of understanding or even accurately summarizing a group identity. The individuals composing a group may largely subscribe to shared myths, but may also hold to secondary and tertiary myths and identities that may then be even further obfuscated by a given individual's experience and psychological makeup. This dizzying complexity does not make the task of understanding impossible, but it does recommend that care be taken in its pursuit.

In the sense that McGee proposes, a rhetorical "people" can be described by its common myths. However, myths do more than describe – they also prescribe (and proscribe) behavior. Political myths lead to action. Myths express "a determination to act" and, according to McGee, are "identical with the convictions of a group."[24] "The people" are "more process than phenomenon,"[25] and constitutive rhetorics, "as they identify, have power because they are oriented towards action" and position communities "towards political, social, and economic action in the material world."[26] These actions flow from a community's ideological beliefs and convictions – from its myths.

One Political Myth: White Supremacy

McNicholl states that identity "can be contested and reformulated in ways that can be either inclusive or exclusive"[27] – and certain political myths manifest in particularly exclusive ways. For several years, Europe and the United States have both been experiencing an especially significant resurgence of far-right, nativist ideologies, and political parties. Popular support for these ideologies has grown in response to many factors (most beyond the scope of this article), but defensive reactions to immigration play a significant role. McNicholl writes that "[a]ntimigrant sentiment and xenophobic attitudes" have been undermining the ability of many nations to function inclusively.[28] Many modern ideological divisions within Western societies seem to mirror one another, though the European refugee crisis affects European society and politics differently to

21. Campbell and Moyers, *Power of Myth,* 39.
22. McGee, "In Search of 'The People,'" 247 (emphasis added).
23. McNicholl, "'Northern Irish' National Identity," 488.
24. McGee, "In Search of 'The People,'" 244.
25. McGee, "In Search of 'The People,'" 242.
26. Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 143 and 141.
27. McNicholl, "'Northern Irish' National Identity," 488.
28. McNicholl, "'Northern Irish' National Identity," 502.

the way immigration at the southern border of the U.S. affects American society and politics. A key differentiating facet of the American version[29] is the pervasive political myth of "whiteness."

In the introduction to his *How the Irish Became White*, Noel Ignatiev defines the "white race" as consisting of "those who partake of the privileges of the white skin in this society. Its most wretched members share a status higher, in certain respects, than that of the most exalted persons excluded from it."[30] The American history of race relations between people considered to have "white" skin (and the power structures they occupy) and others is fraught. It encompasses pre-colonial conflict between European settlers and indigenous peoples and the hereditary chattel slavery of Africans in practice well before the Revolution, to the murder of George Floyd and many other Black Americans by police, and recent iterations of Black Lives Matter protests. In the U.S., whites share a certain status regardless of any class or other disparities between white individuals. This does not mean, however, that all whites experience or even perceive any kind of advantage or "privilege" their skin tone provides them, nor do most even have a strong sense of attachment to "whiteness" as a category. Kaufmann claims that people are "more attached to their narrower ancestry-based ethnic groups than their larger racial groups, despite the fact the larger entities are more important political vehicles for material gain," and these narrower attachments also typically represent "a more salient aspect of their social interactions, voting behaviour, choice of neighbourhood and recreational activity."[31] As with minority racial identity, white identity tends to be "underpinned by an attachment to ethnic groups like Irish, 'American' or Italian"; racial categories like "white" serve as "pan-ethnic superordinate groups, drawing on the appeal of lower-level ethnic attachments."[32] Whites who identify *as* white tend to feel a strong affective bond to their subordinate ethnic groups, and most would not identify as racists or white supremacists. However, as noted above, "whiteness" is a plastic (and exceedingly broad) myth that can be articulated in any of the ways McNicholl posits concerning national identity, whether as a banal physical descriptor, a claim of distinctiveness, or as an action-oriented political project. In the era of Trump-style populism, the lattermost articulation (which may be termed "white nationalism" or "white supremacy") deserves particular scrutiny.

Crockford's ethnographic work in Arizona studying white supremacy helps to define the term, and to explain the ways it presents in modern American society. She notes in her article "Thank God for the greatest country on earth: white supremacy, vigilantes, and survivalists in the struggle to define the American nation" that "white supremacy" carries meanings at two different levels: it may refer to both "the overtly racist extreme far-right of the Aryan Brotherhood and Ku Klux Klan" and also to "American society more generally, [in] that it works in favour of and supports the prosperity of white people to the detriment of other culturally constructed 'races.'"[33] White supremacy functions on a kind of spectrum from outright neo-Nazism to hiring practices favoring applicants with more "white"-sounding names. However, Crockford claims that since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, this continuum has been narrowing, "bringing the extremists closer to the mainstream."[34] As recently as 2001, the Aryan Nations had to operate from the

29. A discussion of the "European version" of these sorts of ideological divisions, while germane to the discussion, is beyond this particular article's margins.
30. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1.
31. Kaufmann, "White Identity," 391 and 386.
32. Kaufmann, "White Identity," 399.
33. Susannah Crockford, "Thank God for the greatest country on earth: white supremacy, vigilantes, and survivalists in the struggle to define the American nation," *Religion, State & Society* 46, no. 3 (2018): 229.
34. Crockford, "Thank God," 229.

relative seclusion of northern Idaho's mountain forests, and were still labelled a "terrorist threat" by the FBI and subsequently dismantled.[35] By the early 2020s, groups branding themselves as "alt-right" and "new right" were marching openly in cities like Charlottesville, VA and counter-protesting at BLM rallies in urban Portland, OR. Crockford argues that the "upsurge in white supremacist group membership and violence in 2016 and 2017 suggests that these groups are becoming more unified."[36] This invites an obvious question: why?

Both Crockford and Negra argue that the rise of white supremacy ultimately stems from fear. For Negra, it is "what Ghassan Hage has termed 'the psychopathology of white decline,' the terror that whiteness in America is losing its social purchase."[37] Immigration, globalization, and progressivism erode the traditional privilege and influence enjoyed and employed by American whites. Crockford expands that explanation to include fears that some whites in Arizona often feel more concretely and immediately, in which the "border is seen as porous, with rumours of al-Qaeda and then ISIS using it for illicit entry and rampant drugs, gangs and illegal immigrants flowing through unchecked."[38] These whites may link fears connected to: a) very real crime and drug prevalence to b) national anxieties over terrorism to c) a sense of being "overrun" through immigration, and ultimately to d) the "loss of white hegemony and economic prosperity"[39] and their very identity as the American "people" – a potent anxiety cocktail. Regardless of the amount of factual evidence or data supporting the fear of a non-white invasion, the fear *feels* true, and therefore affects political stances and actions taken in response to the fear. This is especially so when the fear is felt alongside the concrete realities of many whites actively experiencing increasing economic hardship and loss of power.

Trump – the Republican Party's presumptive presidential nominee – embraces using these fears to further his political aspirations. He utilizes frightening (and sometimes graphic) imagery to great effect, at times managing within a single sentence to tap into multiple sources of American (especially white American) anxiety. In one instance at a March 2023 rally in Waco, TX, Trump claimed that his political opponents were "flooding your towns with deadly drugs, selling your jobs to China, mutilating your children. They're mutilating your children."[40] In another typical speech at a Concerned Women of America summit in September 2023, Trump conflated his opponents with various ideological "enemies" of the US, warning that the upcoming presidential election in 2024 "will decide whether America will be ruled by Marxist, fascist and communist tyrants who want to smash our Judeo-Christian heritage."[41] In his speeches and appearances, Trump regularly and rapidly moves from one rhetorical image to another, evoking communism, fascism, drug dealers, terrorists, and faceless anti-"Judeo-Christian" forces, all for maximum affective effect. Trump also has largely been able to reframe his multiple criminal indictments and various scandals as politically driven "deep state" attacks by an enemy he claims to share with

35. Louis Joseph Freeh, "FBI Press Room – Congressional Statement – 2001 – Threat of Terrorism to the United States," FBI, May 10, 2001, https://web.archive.org/web/20010812035823/http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress01/freeh051001.htm.
36. Crockford, "Thank God," 230.
37. Diane Negra, *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.
38. Crockford, "Thank God," 233.
39. Crockford, "Thank God," 233.
40. Donald Trump, "Speech at Campaign Rally in Waco, Texas" (speech, Waco, TX, March 25, 2023).
41. Donald Trump, "Speech at Concerned Women for America Summit" (speech, Washington, DC, September 15, 2023).

his supporters: "I'm being indicted for you…. Never forget our enemies want to take away my freedom because I will never let them take away your freedom. They want to silence me because I will never let them silence you…. And in the end, they're not after me, they're after you. I just happen to be standing in the way, and I always will."[42] According to Trump, his legal problems are nothing more or less than the martyrdom he suffers on behalf of his supporters.

At the level of electoral politics, whiteness does seem to have a correlation with voting behavior. Kaufmann's 2019 study concludes that "[n]ext to party identity, White identity is the second most important predictor of Trump vote and warmth [positive feeling], ahead of liberal-conservative ideology."[43] A single study does not necessarily reflect a scientific consensus, and further research would be needed to corroborate these findings after the 2020 election of President Joe Biden, but this would seem to indicate that Trump was able during both presidential elections to effectively tap into many of the values and fears of American whites (and continues to do so into the 2024 election season). Neither 2016 nor 2020 bore out elections in which Trump won an *overwhelming* majority of white voters (or, on the other hand, only a handful of non-white voters) and some aspects of ideologically conservative political myths strongly appeal to some minority Americans. However, Trump's populist and nativist rhetoric found (and continues to find) significant purchase with many whites generally, and with white supremacists particularly.

Crockford describes Trump's political rise in terms reminiscent of the rhetorical success of McGee's "advocate" – his emotional appeals position him as "a savior and defender of the people and their America and expands the category of enemy to all non-whites to be defeated in a war with eschatological overtones."[44] Trump explicitly depicts himself in this way, noting in a December 2023 Iowa town hall appearance with Fox News' Sean Hannity that in 2016 he had previously declared himself the "voice" of the people, and further added, "'I am your warrior. I am your justice.' And for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution. I am your retribution."[45] Trump's tacit (and sometimes explicit) approval of violent resistance for people who feel their way of life, and even their very survival, is threatened has also contributed to the sense of impending war. During the first presidential debate in 2020, Trump famously instructed members of the Proud Boys ("a right-wing extremist group with a violent agenda,"[46] according to the Anti-Defamation League) to "stand back and stand by" rather than condemning white supremacist and militia groups that had been showing up at some protests. [47] Trump has continued to employ this kind of rhetorical strategy throughout the most recent election cycle: In his Waco speech in March 2023, Trump referred to the 2024 election as "the final battle"[48] and weeks earlier in Davenport, IA he said that the immigration at the U.S.-Mexican border constituted "an invasion of our country…. It's no different than soldiers….They're not bringing merely

42. Trump, "Speech in Conway."
43. Kaufmann, "White Identity," 388.
44. Crockford, "Thank God," 234.
45. "Trump Town Hall with Hannity 12/5/23 Transcript," Rev, December 6, 2023, https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/trump-town-hall-with-hannity-12-5-23-transcript.
46. "Proud Boys," Anti-Defamation League, December 11, 2023, https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/proud-boys-0.
47. Kathleen Ronayne and Michael Kunzelman, "Trump to far-right extremists: 'Stand back and stand by,'" Associated Press, 30 September 2020, https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-race-and-ethnicity-donald-trump-chris-wallace-0b32339da25fbc9e8b7c7c7066a1db0f.
48. Trump, "Speech in Waco."

bullets, and they're bringing plenty of them….They're killing the blood, the lifestream of our country."[49] Trump also regularly shares a rendition of the 1968 Al Wilson song "The Snake" at some campaign stops, comparing immigrants to the eponymous reptile: "'Shut up, silly woman,' said the reptile with a grin, 'you knew damn well I was a snake before you took me in.' That's what's happening on our border. We're allowing people to pour in…. They shouldn't be allowed to pour into our country. They're going to cause tremendous problems."[50] Trump consistently employs vivid disease and poison imagery to describe immigration at the southern border, depicting the problems there as threatening the very survival of the nation and its people.

In June 2023, Trump painted an especially apocalyptic and militant picture at the Faith and Freedom Coalition's policy conference in Washington, D.C.: "Our enemies," he warned, "are waging war on faith and freedom, on science and religion, on history and tradition, on law and democracy, on God Almighty himself. They are waging war."[51] Crockford claims that some white vigilantes, "fighting for the preservation and resurgence of white supremacy" in American society, already see themselves as soldiers in this war,[52] some of whom found an opportunity to exercise this fantasy by storming the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.[53, 54] Despite ongoing trials and hundreds of convictions for many of these rioters, Trump continues utilizing much of the same kind of militant rhetoric in his political speeches. By pointing to the alleged "fighting age" of male illegal immigrants and issuing dire warnings that "they have something planned" and that they are already "destroying our country," Trump continues to utilize the narrative of impending war.[55]

Outside perspectives, including those of migrant rights groups and watchdog organizations, tend to rhetorically paint many Trump supporters with a broad brush. However, accusations of "racism" or "white supremacy" seem to carry less weight than they once may have for groups that see themselves as "patriots defending the nation"[56, 57] rather than as hate groups.[58] If anything, these broad strokes may serve to accelerate the crystallization of American nationalism, in which "a messy and nuanced reality is rapidly being drawn as two opposing 'sides': right vs. left, conservative vs. liberal, 'white working class' vs. 'coastal elites'. The two sides see the other as imperilling 'their' version of America, and increasingly the safety of their families and the nation."[59] This polarization, Crockford claims, directly leads to aggression, antagonism, and vio-

49. Donald Trump, "Speech in Davenport, Iowa" (speech, Davenport, IA, March 13, 2023).
50. Trump, "Speech in Conway."
51. Donald Trump, "Speech at Faith and Freedom Coalition Conference" (speech, Washington, DC, June 24, 2023).
52. Crockford, "Thank God," 233.
53. Including unidentified persons bearing the famous flag of New York's "Fighting 69th" Irish Brigade.
54. Niall O'Dowd, "Irish Brigade flag flown by mob members at Capitol riots," Irish Central, 12 January 2021, https://www.irishcentral.com/opinion/niallodowd/irish-brigade-flag-flown-capitol-riots.
55. Trump, "Speech in Conway."
56. Some of whom even occasionally (and ironically) invoke America's fight against Nazism: Alex Jones (host of the popular conservative conspiracy theory site InfoWars) at a November 5, 2020 pro-Trump protest outside the Maricopa County (AZ) Recorder's office, was recorded declaring that "we're going to take it directly to those Nazi scumbag bastards that thought they stole this country."
57. Randy Perez (@perez4az), "Alex Jones casually attempting to instigate a Civil War at the Maricopa County Recorder's Office. America, 2020," Twitter, November 5, 2020, https://twitter.com/perez4az/status/1324559557918556161.
58. Crockford, "Thank God," 233.
59. Crockford, "Thank God," 238.

lence. This aggression arises from disillusionment, fear, and a desire to reassert truths claimed by long-held political myths:

> [W]here did this aggression come from? It came slowly, gradually, filtering through the ordinary lives of ordinary people who felt disillusioned and discarded by their nation. They felt that they were in danger of losing one of their few claims to status: that they were a special, chosen people, part of a nation 'under God'. The desire to reassert this special status is strong; they want to be great again. It is not only economic, not only racial, it is both of those and more; it is a *religious animus*. It is about saving 'the people' by excluding those who do not share their 'values' and 'history."[60]

These myths' most zealous adherents believe in the righteousness of their position with a convert's conviction, and will not be persuaded otherwise by the arguments (or accusations) of unbelievers.

A Second Political Myth: Irishness/Celticism

As Kaufmann notes, most whites have a stronger affective relationship with their ancestry-based ethnic identities than with any sense of their "whiteness." "Irishness" is one such mythical identity which in recent decades has proven especially popular, as well as malleable and susceptible to appropriation by white supremacy. In her essay "'The Best Kept Secret in Retail': Selling Irishness in Contemporary America," Casey helpfully posits three categories of consumers or "audiences" of Irishness, two of which pertain to this essay. She labels the first – "the people we mean when we typically refer to 'Irish America'" – as "sanctioned" audiences.[61] These Irish-Americans may celebrate their ancestry in various ways and buy Irish-branded goods, but would not generally consider their ethnic identity as a subordinate group of whiteness. Members of a second category – "deviant" audiences – claim Irish ancestry directly in the service of white supremacy. Such groups employ myths of Irishness and other "Celtic" identities flexibly, depending on their specific ideological beliefs and goals.

McCarthy and Hague assert that claims to "Celtic" identity myths are particularly powerful (coming "replete with a rich, symbolic, and well-known history") and are also "usefully ambiguous" in that "the highly constructed nature of the category enables individuals and groups to construct whatever 'Celtic' history and cultural identity they find useful."[62] This identity claim appeals to whites desiring "a way to be alternative to the mainstream and different from, yet remaining within, Western culture."[63] Some whites, lacking a sense of affective attachment to the myth of whiteness, may find themselves attracted to the accessibility and sense of historical connection that Irishness provides; as Negra argues in her essay "Irishness, Innocence, and American Identity Politics before and after September 11," invocations of Irishness "give shape and substance to nebulous, unstable, and/or discredited notions of national and ethnic identity."[64]

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60. Crockford, "Thank God," 238-239 (emphasis added)
61. Natasha Casey, "'The Best Kept Secret in Retail': Selling Irishness in Contemporary America" in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 86.
62. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 392.
63. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 392.
64. Negra, "Irishness, Innocence, Identity Politics," 359.

Many of the specific markers of Celtic identity that McCarthy and Hague point to as part of a "rich, symbolic, and well-known history" were actually first invented during Irish political projects of an earlier era. They note that during the "Celtic Revival" of the 19th century, claims to Celtic identity "were appeals to solidarity, community, and heterogeneity in the face of British/English cultural and linguistic homogenization."[65] Political and social "advocates" in Ireland and elsewhere (especially those agitating for political independence) appealed to Celtic identities – which utilize a debated linguistic/cultural category that includes such subcategories as Irish, Scottish, and Welsh identities – to differentiate themselves from Anglo identities. In some cases, the nuanced medieval symbolism they drew upon eventually "flattened in the service of politics," specifically political nationalism, according to Maggie Williams's essay discussing modern appropriations of "Celtic" crosses by white supremacists, "'Celtic' Crosses and the Myth of Whiteness."[66] McCarthy and Hague assert that much of the rhetoric used during the Celtic Revival to define the parameters of Celticism has remained considerably stable since that time, continuing to lay out "what are supposedly the central characteristics of Celtic peoples," who are "commonly depicted as emotional, passionate, heroic, struggling against overwhelming odds, wild, and drunken. They fight for land and family, not conquest or gain."[67] Those whites now claiming Celtic identities in the U.S. "commonly envision themselves as the last bastion of this culture with a duty to preserve it in the face of centralization and eradication."[68] The myth of Celticism and what Negra calls "performances of Irishness" especially appeal to Americans who "desire to vicariously play the underdog in struggle with the English or with Anglo-Americans and to get close to the passion for life seemingly evinced by the Irish and sometimes elusive to wasp [sic] culture."[69] Adopting Celticism allows these whites to shift their affective perspective of themselves from inheritors of colonization and oppression to descendants of underdog heroes and revolutionaries.

One problematic aspect of this invocation of Celtic identities is a tendency to elide not only the complicated and at times fraught history between Irish-Americans and other historically-oppressed communities, but also any acknowledgement that Irish-Americans benefit in any way from a superordinate "white" ethnic identity. McCarthy and Hague argue that "invoking 'Celtic' identities provides a powerful way for many white people…to claim an ethnic identity associated with resistance to state oppression…while retaining the benefits of 'white privilege.'"[70] In the particular myth these whites claim, "Celts" are members of a hounded and displaced group, homesteaders fleeing to the margins of empire. They are "transmuted from enemies of Native Americans to fellow victims, sharing experiences of violent eviction, displacement, and disinheritance at the hands of the federal government."[71] Those claiming Irishness or another form of Celticism can "simultaneously maintain a white identity and assert distance from a privileged, dominant position in society" which McCarthy and Hague suggest may indicate that claimed Celtic identities "are in part about class- and place-based differences within white identities and

65. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 390.
66. Maggie M. Williams, "'Celtic' Crosses and the Myth of Whiteness," in *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, ed. Andrew Albin et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 227.
67. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 391.
68. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 391.
69. Negra, *Irish in Us*, 51.
70. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 387.
71. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 401.

privileges."[72, 73] Whites claiming Celtic identities can thus effectively disavow any sense of "white guilt" they might otherwise experience and can "have it both ways: to claim membership in an oppressed, marginalized group within Western countries, entitled to whatever political benefits might follow, while still asserting and reaping all of the benefits of white privilege."[74] In rhetoric and in imagination, these whites have more in common with the descendants of slaves and indigenous peoples than with powerful white elites – even if these racial minorities physically exist mostly beyond the bounds of their white communities.

Eagan describes this tension in her essay "Still 'Black' and Proud': Irish America and the Racial Politics of Hibernophilia," arguing that the Irish "have simultaneously inhabited the identities of white oppressor and colonized victim."[75] Eagan identifies an "Irish and Irish American tendency to link 'Irishness' to a heritage of oppression that is in many ways very distant from their present-day lives."[76] Histories and experiences of prejudice by Irish immigrants "have no parallel in the modern-day Irish American experience,"[77] but they still wield powerful affective clout. Eagan discusses the anger expressed within the Irish-American community in response to the Boston Housing Authority including the shamrock in a list of potentially divisive symbols, indicating "some Irish Americans' failure to admit their shift from a past history of oppression to a present history of assimilation and power" and to "deny their past and present participation in the white power structure."[78] Eagan considers praising Irish-Americans who create "a living, vibrant ethnic identity for themselves," but adds that unfortunately in doing so many inhabit an Irish identity merely as "a way to reassert a lost innocence and still benefit from the privileges of whiteness."[79]

As noted earlier, whiteness operates on a continuum. Many Irish-Americans *would* acknowledge their "past and present participation in the white power structure" and some that would not, would still recoil from explicitly racist white supremacism. However, the use of Celticism and Irishness as myths in the service of white supremacy is not new. McCarthy and Hague catalog some of the modern rhetorical tradition of Irishness serving whiteness, noting that in 1981 "the mass-circulation magazine Newsweek reported that the Confederate States of America…comprised a Celtic people standing in opposition to the Union."[80] Academic rejection of claims to Celticism like this and those expressed in the works of prominent U.S. historians like Grady McWhiney and Forrest McDonald did little to dampen the popularity of these sentiments. Instead, the myth persisted and still "retains currency amongst neo-Confederate nationalist groups in the U.S. South, such as the League of the South" and is frequently used to reinforce "neo-Confederate southern nationalism."[81] These neo-Confederates continue viewing themselves as adherents of anti-imperial Celtic tradition.

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72. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 389.
73. Differences which could arguably allow for a more nuanced reading of identity formation and societal conflict in America beyond binary constructions of racial "whiteness" and "blackness."
74. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 401.
75. Catherine M. Eagan, "Still 'Black' and 'Proud': Irish America and the Racial Politics of Hibernophilia," in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 52.
76. Eagan, "Still 'Black' and 'Proud,'" 20.
77. Eagan, "Still 'Black' and 'Proud,'" 25.
78. Eagan, "Still 'Black' and 'Proud,'" 22.
79. Eagan, "Still 'Black' and 'Proud,'" 26.
80. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 392.
81. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 392 and 402.

Various white supremacist groups beyond neo-Confederate ones also appropriate aspects of Irishness and/or Celticism myths. Rather than looking only to narratives about Celtic settlement of the antebellum South or appealing to Celtic ethnic stereotypes, some white supremacists look to and "fantasize about a pre-national Europe," according to Williams, "where they envision a blended culture of pale-skinned people – Celts, Vikings, Anglo-Saxons – whom they can classify as 'white.'"[82] Williams points out that in historical reality these groups were quite diverse and traded and otherwise interacted with non-European people of color, not to mention the fact that modern American notions of whiteness are recent mythological narratives. As is the case with all myths, however, attempting to counter these narratives with factual discourse and rationale is unlikely to convince true believers. These white supremacists have successfully capitalized on Irishness's economic and cultural explosion within the last three decades. Casey writes that since the 1990s, "as the personal and marketplace capital of Irishness has risen drastically in America, there has been a prolific increase in the use of Irish and/or Celtic imagery among U.S.-based white supremacist groups"[83] and these "deviant" audiences of Irishness now represent one of the fastest-growing consumers of Irishness. Eagan warns that one danger of whites attempting to establish connections with their ethnic roots is the potential development of a "defensive white supremacist mentality"[84] – and as more white Americans have gotten in touch with their "roots," more have been seduced by this mentality.

The crosses shown below in Figures 1-4 are just a part of a greater lexicon of Irish and Celtic cultural markers and symbols (Irish language phrases and songs, flags like that of New York's "Fighting 69th" Irish Brigade seen at the Capitol riots, shamrocks/clovers, etc.) that white supremacists use in certain contexts to communicate with one another.

Figs. 1-3. Examples of "Celtic" cross and knotwork imagery being used in white supremacist tattoos, here shown alongside swastikas, triskeles, and the text "Blood and Honor," a traditional neo-Nazi slogan.[85, 86]

82. Williams, "'Celtic' Crosses," 220.
83. Casey, "Best Kept Secret," 91.
84. Eagan, "Still 'Black' and 'Proud,'" 52.
85. "A Look at Racist Skinhead Symbols and Tattoos," *Intelligence Report*, Southern Poverty Law Center, October 2006, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2006/look-racist-skinhead-symbols-and-tattoos.

Fig. 4. A "Celtic" cross as a part of the front page logo for Stormfront, a white nationalist Internet forum, encircled by the phrase "WHITE PRIDE WORLD WIDE."[87]

Most consumers of these kinds of Irish markers tend to fit the "sanctioned" audiences that Casey posits, and Celtic cross tattoos or shamrocks rarely actually intentionally signal a white supremacist ideology. However, as Negra argues, for some whites Irishness has become "a way of speaking a whiteness that would otherwise be taboo," a way of asserting claims to both dispossession and privilege and for some a way of asserting supremacy.[88] Going a step further, McCarthy and Hague argue that the ambiguity and plasticity of Irishness and Celticism have enabled these myths to vitalize and mobilize a range of political projects over the last two centuries, but that "in the contemporary United States [these myths are] being used primarily for reactionary purposes in ways that make a mockery of the legacy of dispossession and injustice its adherents claim as their own."[89]

Directions for the Future

Myths, as rhetorically theorized in the work of McGee and Charland, resist argumentation and rationalization. Simple solutions to counter white supremacists' appropriation of Irishness – let alone to begin countering the hyper-polarization of American society – via new policies, or better information, or more advanced pedagogical methods, are likely to be doomed proposals. Serious consideration must be given to the reasons many popular American myths appeal so strongly to so many: the fears and anxieties, the losses and griefs, the anger, and the utopian visions of safety, prosperity, and community as a "people." The idea that one could somehow categorically replace "regressive" myths like those underpinning white supremacy with "progressive" myths amounts to magical thinking. In "Staging the Politics of Difference: Homi Bhabha's Critical Literacy," an interview recorded in Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham's *Race, Rhetoric, and the Postcolonial*, Bhabha advocates for the use of theory "to intervene in the continuity and consensus of common sense and also to interrupt the dominant and dominating strategies of generalization."[90] For Bhabha, this is the meaning of literacy: something "which is not merely about competence but is about intervention, the possibility of interpretation as intervention, as interrogation, as relocation, as revision."[91] Bhabha casts an attractive vision. This kind of intervention creates space for myths like Irishness to be reinterpreted in ways that emphasize not only common hardship

86. "Celtic Cross," Anti-Defamation League, accessed October 29, 2020, https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/celtic-cross.
87. "Stormfront – White Nationalist Community," Stormfront, accessed October 29, 2020, https://www.stormfront.org/forum.
88. Negra, "Irishness, Innocence, Identity Politics," 355.
89. McCarthy and Hague, "Race, Nation, and Nature," 402.
90. Homi Bhabha, interview by Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham, "Staging the Politics of Difference: Homi Bhabha's Critical Literacy," in *Race, Rhetoric, and the Postcolonial*, ed. Olson and Worsham (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 12.
91. Bhabha, "Staging the Politics of Difference," 29.

(and perhaps a class-based kinship) with other historically oppressed peoples, but also how whites of Irish descent can use that history to reinforce compassion and to resist complicity in white supremacist ideologies and structures. Nevertheless, a future in which Americans, and humans generally, can avoid the essentialization and homogenization of one another into competing, incompatible groups will require not only effective pedagogical practices of "theory" and critical thinking, but also empathy. Empathy allows one to see another's real, human needs, and then to more effectively propose ways to meet them, or, at the individual level, even helping to meet those needs oneself. As members of diverse communities, we must work to deepen these kinds of human connections with others who hold to myths and ideologies that strike us as alien – or even repugnant. If we choose not to participate in this challenging work, it will be difficult to imagine how our current social atmosphere of fear and partisan strife will change for the better.