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# Complicating host-newcomer dualisms: Irish return migrants as home-comers or newcomers?

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**Abstract**
Popular discourses of contemporary Irish society are often structured on the basis of dualisms which oppose a perceived native/Irish/host community to an imagined foreign/non-Irish/newcomer community. This paper uses the example of Irish return migration to challenge these pervasive dualisms and to highlight the blurred nature of boundaries between host and newcomer. The paper draws on life narrative interviews with recent return migrants to reveal the ways in which they constantly move between the shifting positions of 'insider' and 'outsider'. Migrant narratives of home and return are conceptualised in terms of the ways in which home is inhabited and remembered differently with migration, and as a result is continuously being reprocessed. It is argued that neither home nor belonging are static constructs, and that return migrants constantly re-make and reproduce home and belonging. In this way, they 'bring home' to non-migrants the inherent instability of accepted concepts of place, identity and belonging, and in doing so, unsettle powerful imagined insider-outsider dualisms.

**Keywords**: return, migration, narrative, home, belonging

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## Introduction[1]

Popular discourses of Irish society are often structured on the basis of dualisms which oppose a perceived native/Irish/white/settled/host community to an other foreign/non-white/non-Irish/nomadic/immigrant/newcomer community (Lentin 2002; Gray 2006; Hickman 2007; Fanning and Mutwarasibo 2007; Cadogan 2008). It is clear that such polarisation, based on rigid socially constructed boundaries, are unhelpful. However, despite this, much existing research and policy seems to rely on and reproduce these boundaries. Gray (2006: 124) argues that integration policies produce "tolerant inclusive nationals" on the one hand and "migrants in need of integration" on the other, which ignores the diverse and heterogeneous nature of identity formation. Similarly, Lentin and McVeigh (2006) argue that the emerging intercultural political agenda constructs cultural difference and ethnic minority 'communities' as static and already there, ignoring intra-ethnic differences and contestations. According to Lentin

[1] I wish to acknowledge the support of a HEA North-South Cooperation Grant for this research and would like to thank Breda Gray, Johanne Devlin Trew and two anonymous referees for their very valuable comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

(2002), what is needed is a process of interrogation which moves beyond this politics of recognition.

This paper uses the example of return migration to challenge these pervasive dualisms and to highlight the blurred nature of boundaries between host and newcomer. This is intended to contribute to the process of what Lentin (2002) calls interrogating the Irish 'we', in other words, problematising hegemonic and monocultural constructs of Irishness. I argue here that the return migrant moves constantly between the shifting positions of 'host' and 'newcomer' and can occupy a liminal position in Irish society (see also Corcoran 2003). In this way, the position of the return migrant challenges monocultural assumptions of Irishness as well as some of the dualisms which characterise the ways in which contemporary Irish identities are frequently conceptualised.

## Migration to Ireland

Annual in-migration flows to the Republic of Ireland between 1996 and 2006 reveal the important role played by Irish return migration, a role which is often overlooked in the context of a popular and political obsession with the apparently more visible non-Irish component of in-migration. Since about 2000, annual in-flows of returning Irish migrants have been lower than those of non-Irish migrants. However, Census data reveal that in terms of stocks of migrants, numbers are very similar. Census 2006 data show that Irish-born migrants comprise 8.8 per cent of the population (374,753 persons) while non-Irish-born migrants (403,824 persons) comprise 9.5 per cent[2] (CSO 2006). This suggests that Irish-born migrants are more likely to remain in Ireland for longer than non-Irish-born migrants.

There is little public recognition of the role played by return migration in in-migration to Ireland. Neither is there recognition of the role played by foreign-born Irish citizens in Ireland's migrant population. Foreign-born persons of Irish nationality in the population comprise well over 100,000 (CSO 2006). Return migrants, as well as foreign-born Irish migrants, clearly comprise a numerically significant section of the population, but they are also in many ways relatively invisible populations, overshadowed in public consciousness by the visibility of the non-Irish component of in-migration. This invisibility is reminiscent of the cultural invisibility of Irish migrants in Britain, as identified by Walter (2001) and Mac and Ghaill (2001). This can be related in part to the dominance of the colour paradigm in British race relations discourses, which ascribes a deterministic role to the black-white dichotomy, and therefore assumes that white minorities assimilate unproblematically (Mac an Ghaill 2001). The power of this model is such that it has become influential in framing discussions of migration and belonging in Ireland, where the host community is imagined as white and Irish, while immigrants are constructed as non-Irish and of a different ethnic, racial or national background. This is reflected in the racialization of categories used for ethnic classification in the 2006 Census of Ireland, i.e, White, Black and Asian (King-O'Riain 2007). As Cadogan (2008) argues, this constructs an unquestioned homogeneous white Irish majority against which are measured exotic

[2] Since 1986, a question has been included in the Census on whether one has ever lived outside Ireland for at least one year. This can be disaggregated by place of birth, which gives a reasonable indication of the total stock of return migrants in the population, as opposed to the annual flows, although it is admittedly a very broad definition of a return migrant

and deviant minorities. The dominance of this dualistic us/them explanatory model means that the invisibility of Irish migrants is perpetuated on their return to Ireland.

## Research methodology

The recently completed *Narratives of Migration and Return* project (NMR) on which this paper draws aimed to address the invisibility of return migrants by recording life narratives of recent return migrants for an oral archive. It was a collaborative project between researchers in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.[3] This paper draws mainly on 33 interviews conducted therein across Munster, Leinster and Connacht, with people who had emigrated in the 1980s and returned sometime since the mid-1990s. Three of the interviews were with couples, so in total 36 individuals were interviewed. The research involved life narrative interviews, exploring return migrants' experiences of growing up in Ireland, (e)migration in the 1980s/early 1990s, and return during the late 1990s/early 21st century. The interviews were mainly individual face-to-face interviews (apart from the three interviews with couples). They were one-off interviews, usually conducted in the participant's home, and tended to last between about 75 and 120 minutes. The research targeted a sample of the 1980s and early 1990s generation of emigrants, using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Drawing on evidence from Punch and Finneran (1999), some of the main social groups who had been returning in recent years were targeted using a combination of public advertising, personal contacts and contacts through support organisations. The participants included construction workers, people who had been undocumented migrants in the US, people working in the caring professions (nursing, social work/care) as well as other graduates and professionals. A broad spectrum of other occupations was also included and an attempt was made to achieve a balance in terms of gender. All but one of the participants emigrated from Ireland during the 1980s and early 1990s (one emigrated in 1978), and all returned to Ireland during the 1990s or 2000s.

## Homecoming

The dream of return is a powerful myth of diasporic discourses, playing an important symbolic role in the maintenance of diasporic identities and ideologies. It contributes to nostalgic and idealised imaginings of a homeland, around which identities in the diaspora can be mobilised. As a result, return migration is frequently conceived in terms of an opposition between myth and reality, highlighting a disjuncture between 'home' as dream and 'home' as actually experienced. However, while this is a useful conceptual framework, the negotiations of identity and belonging involved in the process of return migration are more complex than this (Stefansson 2004). As Christou states, return migrants "generate multidimensional understandings of self and belonging, rationalised through the return migratory project" (2006b: 835). Return migrants develop fluid identifications and narratives that make sense to them and to others in the context of the encounters, disruptions and affirmations they experience as part of the return migration process.

[3] This project was funded by the HEA through a North-South Cooperation Grant, 2003-2005. It involved researchers in University College Cork, Centre for Migration Studies (Omagh), University of Limerick and Queens University Belfast.

Affirming a sense of belonging to the place of return is one possibility. Constructing the return migration process in terms of homecoming provides a powerful framework within which to make sense of it, where this is possible. Many return migrants in the NMR research express a strong sense of belonging to Ireland, or to a specific place in Ireland. This is often articulated in terms of a sense of community, associated with family, social networks and place, which reinforces similar findings by Corcoran (2002) and Jones (2003). For example, Sarah speaks about wanting to return to be nearer to family, and implies that not only was her decision to return based on the presence of her family in Ireland but also on what she perceived as a general lack of strong family structures in Britain:

> I think that was a deciding factor - I didn't have a family structure [there]. But even if you were [from there], I guess maybe it was because of my work, the people I got to know, they didn't have huge family structures either (Sarah[4], 30s, returned from Britain).

Elaine talks about wanting to return to what she calls her roots in Ireland, which she defines in terms of family:

> Because I don't think I could have lived away from my sisters, they would have had to have come out [to Australia], and just seeing them having children and that. I don't think you can live-, you know you've got one life, you've got your roots, and then you miss out on all those wonderful things, you can't replace that with a swim on a beach or sand or blue skies you know (Elaine, 30s, returned from Australia).

Ireland is constructed by many of the return migrants in terms which emphasise particular values of community and family. Their journeys back to Ireland are represented as journeys home and a return to security and family. Corcoran (2003: 145) conceptualises this as a "quest for anchorage".

The narrative of return as homecoming emphasises the migrant's connection to Ireland and to place, highlighting a kind of 'natural' and taken-for-granted inclusion in family, kin and social networks in the place. For example, Claire tried to explain what it meant to her to be back amongst "her own":

> The best thing about being back I suppose was being back. I've made the decision and I'm in my home country and I'm around my own people. There's a lot to be said for that. I think as you get a bit older as well there is an understanding amongst your own nation that's, it's just an understanding that's a recognised thing, of 'you're with your own', you know. That I can have a conversation with you and use terms or whatever and you know the nature of me because you know where I've come from so you already have an understanding of the kind of person I am because you're Irish yourself, d'you know that kind of thing, whereas if I was speaking to someone from a different nationality, you'd be clarifying, and explaining, d'you know, so it's like, hah! [strong exhalation], I don't have to explain any of this or who I am

[4] All names have been changed to protect participants' anonymity. Exact details of countries of destination are not always included for the same reason.

> or where I come from because it's an unsaid understanding, so that's reassuring and relaxing in itself, that you're just around your own people I suppose (Claire, 30s, returned from Britain).

Return migrants are able to "construct narratives that render meaning to their experience of homecoming" (Pattie 2004: 11). Claire above emphasises an unspoken and normative connection to her 'own people', which she equates with her 'nation'. Her narrative expresses a powerfully physical sense of relief that comes with the act of return, thus reaffirming the dream of return which she claims to have had while living outside Ireland. It is a way of making sense of her return migration. By asserting a sense of belonging and connection to the place, the decision to return is rationalised. This narrative firmly positions Claire as a cultural insider, and by distancing herself from people of other nationalities and from connections with them, she is also distancing herself from her own migrant status.

This powerful narrative of return migration as homecoming reflects the way in which return migration is viewed in Irish society generally, which involves an expectation that return migrants will re-integrate into Irish society unproblematically. In fact they are often not really considered to be 'migrants' at all. Drawing on Stefansson (2004), this can be related to the dominance of sedentary thinking, whereby migration is viewed as disrupting the close connection between place and self, and return migration is therefore seen as an unproblematic and natural reinsertion into a place of origin. Therefore, return migrants are not considered to be migrants, but simply 'homecomers' who are returning to where they 'naturally' belong. So, in popular and political discourse in Ireland, the terms immigration and immigrants tend to be used interchangeably with terms such as non-Irish, non-national and newcomer, reflecting the host-newcomer dualism which draws boundaries between Irish/homecomer on the one hand and non-Irish/newcomer on the other.

This is reflected in government policy, where immigration is the remit of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and of the Minister of State for Integration Policy, while return migration is part of the remit of the Irish Abroad Unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs. Since the 1990s, there has been a growing recognition and encouragement of close relations between the Irish state and the Irish diaspora, with for example the establishment of the Irish Abroad Unit and the distribution of funds to organisations that support vulnerable emigrants and returning migrants. In addition, during the economic boom years, the government and private employment agencies in Ireland actively recruited emigrants to return and contribute to the economic transformation. Analysis by Hayward and Howard (2007) of the publicity material used in these campaigns reveals the ways in which assumptions of romantic and cultural connections between Ireland and its diaspora were used in order to attract skilled workers from the diaspora. It could be argued then that return migrants are officially included in a collective, increasingly global, deterritorialised (yet still familial-based and exclusive) notion of Irishness. The construction of Irishness in terms of a global family, linked to blood and ancestry (see Nash 2008), is emerging in recent years in certain official and popular discourses, for example President McAleese's invocation of the global Irish family (see Gray 2002). The 'Irish abroad' are now officially recognized by the government as belonging to the Irish nation (Gray 2006), and this has been institutionalized through the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the 2004 Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act. Mac Éinrí

(2008: 14) refers to this notion of Irishness in terms of an "ethno-nation", based on kinship, which embraces Irish emigrants outside Ireland and their descendents but excludes "outsiders within Ireland". However, this denies the existence of blurred lines around the category 'Irish' (Cadogan, 2008) or of what Lentin calls "the unseemly presence of the 'less than fully Irish'" (2002: 233).

**Not quite belonging**

The seemingly unquestioned inclusion of return migrants within this particular notion of collective Irishness has a number of implications. It implies that return migrants should re-integrate unproblematically and should not experience any of the issues faced by those migrating to an unfamiliar or new country. They are expected to feel a sense of belonging and homecoming, and therefore issues such as loneliness and adjustment are either not acknowledged or are unexpected. However, of course, many return migrants do report such experiences. Many studies in other contexts highlight the processes of adjustment and feelings of alienation and not-belonging experienced by return migrants (see Constable 1999; Long and Oxfeld 2004; Christou 2006a). Most refer to the sense of disappointment associated with the return experience, which also emerged in this research. Christou's (2006b: 837) research with second generation Greek-American return migrants reflects on the spaces of exclusion and alienation experienced by them in Greece, as they come to terms with the disappointments of their return and their "reactive displacement from modern (Greek) life". Markowitz and Stefansson (2004) term this a "re-diasporization", whereby return migrants form a new diaspora in the "country of origin". Such experiences are felt even more sharply by return migrants because of the expectation of belonging.

> Coming back to Ireland, re-settling, was difficult in many ways because I thought it was going to be so easy to come back to [this town]. You know the people, you know the places. But it's not that easy. Finding work was hard initially. Finding the right type of work. It took a number of months to resettle (Tim, 40s, returned from Britain, Germany, Africa).

Narratives of 'not quite belonging' recur among return migrants in this research, which unsettles assumptions of Irish homogeneity, of a shared sense of Irishness regardless of one's history. For example, Bill reflected throughout his narrative on his own sense of not being one of the 'in-group' in Ireland:

> I suppose there was a funny attitude in Ireland to emigrants. At one stage, it's phoney accents and everyone thinking 'oh God here they come' and people trumpeting how wonderful where they are is, and nobody particularly wants to be one of those people… and I suppose Irish people don't regard Irish abroad as one of us, so in that sense you're not really one of us any more, you're outside our circle now, you're not one of us now. […] When you leave, you're gone, you've left our tribe (Bill, 40s, returned from Britain).

Bill is referring to a construction of the *emigrant* as outsider, pointing to a rigid imagined boundary between 'Irish in Ireland' and 'Irish abroad'.

Reflecting the construction of 'Irish abroad' as somehow different to 'Irish in Ireland', a denial of belonging for second or third generation Irish is common (Hickman *et al*. 2005). Hickman *et al*. (2005) argue that there has been a historic

denial of diaspora within Ireland, and a sense that if one was not born in Ireland, one's claim to Irishness lacks authenticity (as reflected in the derogatory 'plastic paddy' term). This subtle exclusion of the return migrant and second generation Irish person from acceptance as 'fully Irish' clashes with the official and accepted notion of Irishness which is inclusive of the diaspora and the return migrant.

Bill's narrative is one of a negotiation of his own position in relation to this imagined boundary between 'Irish in Ireland' and 'Irish abroad'. He is aware that in order to be fully accepted, he needs to present himself as one of the Irish in Ireland and not as a returning emigrant with a "phoney accent… trumpeting how wonderful" where he lives is. At the same time, he is aware of his own sense of difference in relation to what he calls "the tribe". He goes on to state: "I think once you've left you're different", referring to a social distance that separates the migrant from the home community. He explains this in terms of the lack of time spent by the emigrant in Ireland once they are living outside Ireland, thus limiting the social and face-to-face interaction that can take place.

This points to the importance of co-presence, or being physically present together, in shaping social interaction. Mason's (2004) research among the Pakistani diaspora highlights the importance of co-presence in the maintenance of bonds of solidarity among dispersed family members, pointing to the significance of 'doing things together' and 'being there at key moments'. Migration creates a social distance between migrants and stayers, which is often not recognised until the return migration experience highlights the ways in which both migrants and the 'home' community have changed since the initial migration (Stefansson, 2004). There is often a sense of disconnection from Irish society among return migrants, a result of the inevitable moving apart associated with migration. The everyday connections of dwelling in a place, even if one feels at times like a stranger there, contribute to a sense of place. As Fanning (2008) argues, place matters as well as culture in defining how we think of ourselves. Michelle refers to the 'gap' she feels exists between her and her peers in Ireland as a result of having spent much of her young adulthood in Britain.

> I think maybe it's when you're young, well you can make friends at any age, but it's easier when you're younger, because everyone has their own little group that they're really friends with. […] I still feel we've kind of missed out here because we were away so long. There's kind of a gap (Michelle, 40s, returned from Britain).

So, return migrants are expected to fit in unproblematically, based on their Irishness, and their experiences of difference are denied, suggesting that it is considered impossible to be both fully Irish and a migrant.

This is reflected in a denial of return migrants' migrancy. Some of the return migrants spoke about feeling that there was a lack of interest in their experiences outside Ireland among peers in Ireland. This was particularly so in relation to experiences of the workplace, where the collision between the expectation that one will fit in socially on the one hand, and a sense of anxiety regarding one's migrant status on the other, is particularly sharp. Noreen, who had trained and worked as a nurse in Britain, and was unsuccessful a number of times in applying for work in Ireland until she got her first job, feels her work experience outside Ireland was not always recognised:

> But the fact that when I went for the other interviews, 'no, you're not Irish-trained, we don't want you here', basically that kind of attitude, and that is still, I won't say the name of the hospital now, but 'you're not trained here, in this particular hospital, so you're not one of us' (Noreen, 30s, returned from Britain).

In contrast, Bill, who had worked for many years in Britain, pointed out that the company in which he worked in Ireland frequently appointed consultants from Britain at some expense but would not seek the advice of its own employees who had worked in Britain. This suggests a refusal to acknowledge their migrancy or to show an interest in their experiences outside Ireland. (This is particularly interesting given that return migrants have higher educational attainments than the non-migrant population (Barrett and Trace, 1999)). So, while Noreen felt that she had been put in the position of an outsider, Bill's experience was of denial of his migrancy. Both suggest a degree of discomfort on the part of employers with regard to work practices and ideas being introduced to the workplace by Irish workers who had worked outside Ireland. Common to both is a sense that those who are Irish cannot also be migrants/newcomers. The myth of homogeneity of Irishness does not allow for this, as it sets up an opposition between an imagined monocultural host and immigrants (Hickman 2007).

**Conditionality of belonging**

It is evident from the narratives of return migrants that there is a certain awareness among them of this impossibility. The denial of return migrants' migrancy is one way in which society deals with it, with the result that, ostensibly, emigrants and return migrants are included in a collective sense of Irishness. However, at the core of this inclusion is a conditionality of belonging. It seems that being accepted as one of 'us', or in other words as 'fully Irish', is conditional on a number of factors.

One of these is not complaining about Ireland. This is articulated by return migrant Kate. On her return from the US to Ireland, she talked about what she saw as the poor standard of services in Ireland. However, she felt that it was particularly unacceptable for her, as a return migrant, to complain about 'Ireland.' Referring to "the people who live here", she says,

> one thing they don't like is when we give out about Ireland! They don't like that. If you say well I think that's expensive, or… It's like as if you're personally hitting them. But you're not, you're hitting at the establishment, the government, yeah it's as if, kind of… maybe its because you've moved back in, that you're the returned emigrant, you think you can compare it to you know… They don't like when you bitch. They don't and I have to stop myself sometimes, I'm not as bad as I used to be! (Kate, 40s, returned from US).

This sense of the unacceptability of any criticism of Ireland mirrors Gray's (1997) argument that, in the 1980s, emigrants' critical views towards Irish society were silenced with the help of government and media discourses of emigration as success and opportunity. This intolerance of criticism can be related also to historical stereotypes of the return migrant as someone who consistently denigrates Ireland and makes unfavourable comparisons with where they have lived. Some return migrants

are aware of this stereotype and attempt to distance themselves from it. Michael (40s, returned from the US), for example, is aware of the "returned Yank" stereotype. He talks somewhat disapprovingly about other emigrants who come back to Ireland, having acquired American accents, and who talk loudly about what a terrible country Ireland is in comparison to America. He is careful to differentiate himself from them. As another returnee (Sinead, 30s, returned from Britain) put it, "nobody wants to be known as a moaning migrant".

Another condition of belonging, related to this, is simply not talking too much about one's time outside Ireland. Similarly, Knörr (2005) found return migrant children in Germany experienced a lack of interest in their cultural background and a certain rejection of their knowledge of Africa, where they had previously lived. Michael talks about keeping his experiences of being abroad to himself:

> I found that, all my experiences of being abroad are my own experiences. Nobody really wants to know about what I did. I think, when I came back first, I'd be talking about this, that and the other. But I know people – they're sort of interested on a superficial level, but they're not really interested in my feelings about being overseas or anything like that. So I keep a lot of that stuff to myself (Michael, 40s, returned from US and Middle East).

In other words, return migrants learn that there is a lack of interest in their experiences of living outside Ireland, and that to be accepted as fully belonging, these experiences need to remain unspoken. This is possible because in some senses the space for articulating these experiences is limited. Thus return migrants become complicit in the denial of their own migrancy, so that they can be accepted as Irish. In fact, return migrants often do not construct their own identities around their status as migrants. This is reflected in the comments of many of the participants in this research, who stated that they had not considered themselves to be return migrants until they saw an advertisement for this project, looking for people who had left Ireland and returned.

Accent is another extremely important qualification for acceptance as Irish or 'local' (Hickman 2002; Sparks 2006; Walter 2008). Many of the return migrants that I spoke to were very aware that speaking in an Irish accent would ease their re-integration.

> I think because my husband was from around here, he just slotted back in. I never lost my accent. Now I think if you were American coming or had become completely immersed in the American way of life… [but] I've always been Irish (Sheila, 40s, returned from US and Australia).

Sheila recognises that her husband's local credentials were crucial to their being accepted locally, but also that neither of them had lost their Irish accents. In fact, she seems to equate 'being Irish' with having an Irish accent, thus accepting the role of accent as a signifier of belonging/otherness. This becomes particularly problematic for second generation Irish people who move to Ireland. They find that although they have been brought up to identify as Irish, their British, American or other accents are used to mark them out as being different.

In my current research, I explore how second and third generation Irish children who move to Ireland with their families negotiate their identities in this context. Children

can be very aware of the subtleties of what is and is not acceptable among both their peers and the adults with whom they come into contact. As there is often a very strong desire among children to fit in unproblematically, they frequently adjust their behaviour, vocabulary or accent in order to do so. For example, Anne, who was born in Britain and moved to Ireland with her second generation Irish parents when she was five, told me that she remembers consciously changing her accent and her vocabulary in order to fit in, when she was five. She felt she was left with no choice but to adopt 'Irish' expressions, an Irish accent and 'Irish' ways.

> You really need to fit in, or else they treat you differently […] You have to do what they expect. There's no leeway. […]. What they were saying when they were laughing [at my expressions] was 'that's not the way we say things around here.' It was like a message. You just have to adjust. They don't let you get away with it (Anne, early 20s, born in Britain).

This example reveals the ways in which a migrant child's freedom of expression is closely curtailed by non-migrant peers and adults, so that she submits completely to pressure to conform. However, moments of contestation also occur in which it is possible for migrants to resist pressures to conform and to introduce change. For example, Sarah talks about how her return to the family home subverted the existing (patriarchal) dynamics in the home:

> I caused lots of problems for [my brother], because I insisted on paying rent, so then he had to pay rent. Then my mother was still ironing his clothes. I was like, if you're going to iron his clothes, you've got to iron mine as well, so she stopped ironing his clothes! Then I increased the rent that I was giving her, and insisted that he increase his rent too! So he wasn't so happy about me coming home. I caused him a lot of problems! (Sarah, 30s, returned from Britain).

These experiences of conditional belonging point to a certain anxiety on the part of non-migrant Irish in relation to difference and migrancy. The presence of the migrant Irish appears to unsettle accepted notions of homogeneous identities. Belonging and being accepted as fully Irish is to a large extent a question of voice. Voicing one's experiences of life beyond Ireland, voicing one's criticisms of Irish society, or simply using one's voice, can all mark one out as being different and not fully Irish. Being accepted may involve, at times, simply being silent. (Similarly, in Britain, silence has been used as a strategy among the Irish to conceal accents which have marked them out as different and other (Walter 2002)). Moments of contestation between non-migrant and migrant occur, with different outcomes in different contexts. While there is space in which to challenge hegemonic ideas, and at time return migrants do so, the close association between belonging and voice means that return migrants can disappear into an imagined white Irish majority, through processes of silencing and invisibility. The presence of the "not fully Irish" (Lentin 2002) threatens the imagined homogeneity of the Irish 'we'/imagined community. As Nititham (2008) puts it, the term 'Irish' is assumed to be impenetrable and immutable. Therefore, any blurring of the boundaries around what is assumed to represent Irishness tends to be avoided.

## Liminality

I argue therefore that there are two dominant and competing but related discourses relating to the position of return migrants in Irish society: one, a homogenising discourse which constructs return migrants as unproblematically Irish (and denies their difference and migrancy) and second, an opposing and competing discourse which constructs emigrants and their offspring and return migrants as 'not quite Irish' (involving denial of their claims to fully belong). In other words, the possibility of in-betweenness is neither recognised nor accepted. Attempts are made to locate the return migrant as either an Irish home-comer or a migrant who cannot fit in. Therefore the liminal and fluid nature of return migrant identities is not acknowledged.

Postcolonial literature has highlighted the importance of concepts of liminality and hybridity to understanding migrant identities. The concept of diaspora in particular has been used to explore the ways in which the dislocations and boundary-crossings of migration challenge hegemonic discourses of identity (Boyce Davies 1994; Gilroy 1997). Research with migrants and minority groups in different contexts highlights the contradictions inherent in hegemonic ideals of identity by revealing the interstitial spaces in between them, which are occupied by those on the margins of such constructs (for example, Yau 2007). While the position of return migrants in particular has not been widely researched from postcolonial perspectives, Phillips and Potter (2006) argue that return migration must be understood in the context of hybrid identities and liminal spaces. They use these concepts to reveal the ways in which Bajan-British return migrants are involved in countless contestations of identity within Barbadian social structures. While they are writing about a very specific postcolonial context, the concepts of boundary-crossing and in-betweenness are highly relevant to understandings of contemporary dynamics of return migration and identity in other contexts. For example, Christou (2006a: 200) writes about the "transhybrid identities" of second generation Greek-American return migrants, referring to the possibility of having a sense of belonging simultaneously to two worlds which are dynamically intertwined.

In a similar way, return migrants to Ireland are involved in contestations of identity. As they seek to belong while maintaining a sense of self and individuality, they move between the shifting positions of 'insider' and 'outsider', their situation highlighting the blurred and complex nature of insider-outsider constructs in Irish society. Constable's (1999) work on Filipina narratives of return conceptualises this in terms of the ambivalence towards home and return among migrants, and points to the fragmentation of self which is associated with the contradictions of the migrant situation. There is a tension in return migrants' narratives between a sense of belonging both here and somewhere else simultaneously. Their narratives embody the collision between expectations of unproblematic belonging and recognition of their own migrancy. This can be reflected in narratives which move between expressing at one point a position of belonging to Ireland-as-home, and at another, articulating a sense of distance from Ireland/home, or a continuing tie to 'elsewhere-as-home'. Kate talks about what it was like coming to Ireland on holidays from the US:

> Going **home** for the holiday, oh it was great, **but** when I had the kids I found it very stressful because you were travelling all around to see everybody so it wasn't like a holiday, you'd go back drained […] **But** it was lovely going **home but** I'd know when my holiday would be up I'd be very sad leaving my

> mum, […] and it would take me a week or two to settle, **but** then I'd be happy then again, because it was our **home** (Kate, 40s, returned from US; emphasis added).

Later in the interview, she talks about what it is like now going to the US on holidays.

> I've been back three times I'd say to New York or four, I've been back a few times, and when I go back over there, it's as if I never left. My sister gives me her car and I'm just driving around and it's like as if I... I think once you've lived there and you go back you settle in very fast. You just become part of it again really quick. I found that. (Kate, 40s, returned from US).

Sheller (2003) reflects on the way in which migration can be imagined *both* as homecoming and home-leaving simultaneously, and not necessarily as a linear movement to or from home. In other words, home is both re-made and re-membered through migration (Ahmed *et al* 2003; Fortier 2003). This involves a destabilization of the very notion of home as static and foundational, as a place one leaves and either forgets or later returns to. It means that home loses its fixed and foundational character and becomes re-imagined in terms of mobility and transformation. Home is not the same place you left, or the place you thought you left. Not only does the place itself change constantly, but imaginings of the place and what it means are reproduced. This disrupts the linear or circular narrative of 'home-leaving followed by homecoming'.

Drawing on Ahmed *et al* (2003), it is helpful to understand migrant narratives of home and return in terms of the ways in which home is inhabited and remembered differently with migration, and as a result is continuously being reprocessed. Here, Sarah remembers how her feelings towards Ireland started to change when she had lived in Britain for a number of years.

> So I started missing out on that aspect, of, of a small community, what I had disliked before, I now realised was actually an advantage. So. And then on telly you'd start seeing newsclips of, Temple Bar! That was becoming the in-place so there was reports on [British] television about Temple Bar, and then Fr. Ted started, and I loved it. I was sitting there watching Fr. Ted, going 'ah that's just spot on and thank God somebody's taking the mickey out of the priesthood', and I thought to myself, this is just great (Sarah, 30s, returned from Britain).

While Sarah had constructed her initial emigration from rural Ireland in terms of escape from a narrow and homogeneous society, having lived in Britain for a number of years, she then began to visualise and imagine that society differently, relating this explicitly to media constructions of Ireland which she received in Britain. This was in part about seeing images of a changing Ireland, but also about imagining Irish society in a different way (for Sarah, the latter was about appreciating the advantages of small communities, and about a sense of emerging irreverence in Irish society, disrupting the traditional hegemony of the church, as reflected in the Father Ted television series).

As argued by Fortier (2003), what is needed is a model of belonging which bridges the gap between here and there, what she calls a translational model of migration and identity. This is similar to Christou's narratives of interaction and transhybrid identities, whereby belongingness "is negotiated in the in-betweenness of the 'here and there', the spaces of interaction in 'home and host' constructs that 'translates' the 'self' through subjective and inner experience" (Christou 2006a: 209). Marie told me that coming back was not what she expected. When I asked her to elaborate, she said:

> I don't know what I expected when I came back. […] I had been home so I couldn't say I didn't know what it was like… I would say I found it so expensive. In the States, you had the choice […] There wasn't the choice. Simple little things. But Ireland was still welcoming back to us – setting up bank accounts, things like that – but just it's a different country – I had left at 20-21, so I was a kid when I left it, I came back an adult. I don't know what I expected coming back (Marie, 40s, returned from US).

This excerpt indicates that Marie did not have a fixed idea of what Ireland/the home-place would be like before she returned. She had been back on return visits, but had not lived there as an adult, so in one way she knew what to expect (expense, lack of choice), but in another way, it was still new to her. This is not a simple narrative of either 'coming back home' or 'moving to a new place.' It is a complex and in-between narrative which moves between both but also sits in the undefined space between the two. This recognises that neither home nor belonging are static constructs, and that in negotiating identities between here and there, return migrants constantly re-make and reproduce home and belonging. In this way, they 'bring home' to non-migrants the inherent instability of accepted concepts of place, identity and belonging, and in doing so, unsettle powerful imagined insider-outsider dualisms.

## Conclusions

Return migrants are in many ways invisible and inaudible in the Irish population. The hegemony of the host-newcomer dualism contributes to the presence of Irish-born migrants being overlooked. This is reproduced socially through the dominance of two polarised constructions of return migrants – as belonging unproblematically and therefore denial of migrancy, or as 'not fully Irish' and therefore not belonging. This reflects an imagined boundary between 'Irish in Ireland' and 'Irish abroad'. Return migrants are expected to fit in unproblematically or risk being labelled as emigrants, plastic paddies or outsiders. Fitting in can mean denying their own migrancy and silencing voices of difference. However, allowing return migrants to tell their stories reveals ambivalent relationships with home, and narratives that are not simply about either being home-comers or newcomers. As Minh-ha (1994: 22) states, "travellers' tales not only bring the over-there home, and the over-here abroad", they also challenge the home-abroad dichotomy. The position of return migrant can shift between that of host and newcomer in the course of one day or in the course of one interview. This reflects the instability of these constructs of host and newcomer.

Processes of inclusion and exclusion relating to the positions of migrants and minorities in Irish society are highly complex and cannot be subsumed within a simple host/newcomer dualism. This is not to deny that popular and political

discourses do reproduce polarised and simplistic constructions of identity, which are reflected in deep structural and institutional inequalities in Irish society. But to understand how this essentialisation happens, it may be helpful to explore the liminal spaces which highlight the fragility of the rigid boundaries on which they are based. As researchers and commentators on immigration issues, it is important that we do not perpetuate these popular dualisms and instead seek to move beyond them to understand the complexities of insider-outsider relations in Irish society.

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