

**The sensuous secrets of shelter: how recollections of food stimulate Irish men's reconstructions of their early formative residential experiences in Leicester, Sheffield and Manchester**

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**The sensuous secrets of shelter: how recollections of food stimulate Irish men's reconstructions of their early formative residential experiences in Leicester, Sheffield and Manchester.**

**Dr Angela Maye-Banbury and Dr Rionach Casey**

This paper examines the intersection between food, recollection and Irish migrants' reconstructions of their housing pathways in the three English cities of Leicester (East Midlands), Sheffield (South Yorkshire) and Manchester (North). Previous studies have acknowledged more implicitly the role of memory in representing the Irish migrant experience in England. Here, we adopt a different stance. We explore the mnemonic power of food to encode, decode and recode Irish men's reconstructions of their housing pathways in England when constructing and negotiating otherness. In doing so, we apply a 'Proustian anthropological' approach in framing the men's representations of their formative residential experiences in the boarding houses of the three English cities during the 1950s and 1960s are examined. The extent to which food provided in the boarding houses was used as an instrument of discipline and control is examined. The relevance of food related acts of resistance, food insecurity and acts of hedonic meat-centric eating in constructing the men's sociocultural identity are also explored.

Irish oral history food memory

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## **Introduction**

When we consider the Kantian claim that all knowledge begins with the senses, the case for a more sensuous approach to the Irish migrant experience becomes that bit more compelling. A substantial body of research already exists which explores the factors which shape Irish men's' sociocultural identities both as residents in England (Leavy et al 2004; Field 1994) and on an international level (Marston 2002; Clary - Lemon 2010). Equally, the legitimacy of using food as a means of exploring sociocultural identity is well established in existing scholarship (Law 2001; Sutton 2001), often highlighting the way in which patterns of food consumptions shape social practices both inside and outside the home (Caplan 2013; Lupton 1994; Murcott 1983).

Here, we adopt a different stance. We postulate that just as memories are shaped by the senses, so too are sensory experiences shaped by memories. We argue that the hegemony of 'food centred memory' (Holtzman 2006: 361) is inextricably linked to our interviewees' representations of their housing pathways in the three English cities of Leicester, Sheffield and Manchester in the 1950s and 1960s. Given the dearth of employment opportunities in rural Ireland, thousands of Irish migrated to England in search of work during this period. Largely unskilled with low education attainment levels, our interviewees looked to the urban centres of Leicester, Sheffield and Manchester in the post war period to find work, notably in the textile, steel and coal mining industries (Taylor et al 1996; Williamson, 2002). However, our analysis here differs from these existing accounts of the Irish in England. Here, we consider the relative merits of Proustian scholarship in exposing how the multifaceted, gustemological and discursive qualities of food centred

memory to promote further understanding of the Irish migrant residential experience in England during this period. By placing the sensuous nature of food at the centre of our analysis, we show how specific historical reference points in our interviewees' accounts of their housing pathways became crystallised to form a landscape of previously undisclosed insights pertinent to the Irish imaginary in England during this period. For Pierre Nora (1989), these discernible historical junctures synthesise to create *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). According to Nora, we are unable to rely on our real sites of memory (characterised by Nora as *milieux de mémoire*). Human memory is fallible, fragmented and selective. We need, therefore, to content ourselves with drawing on *lieux de mémoire* when recollecting past events. These unique *les lieux de mémoire* are 'simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial and at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration' (Nora 1989: 18). In short, as Huyssen (2003) suggests, the fear of forgetting triggers the desire to remember - and vice versa. Yet, as we will demonstrate, sensuously generated knowledge may stimulate access to these more latent and hitherto undocumented sites of memory relevant to the Irish migrant experience in England.

Drawing on extracts from previously unpublished oral testimony data, we address a number of key questions relevant to the distinct mnemonic qualities of food and the Irish migrant experience. How might a focus on the sensory cues enshrined in food itself aid our understanding of the social, cultural and economic context in which our respondents found themselves during those early years in England? To what extent is food represented by those interviewed as an instrument of discipline, pleasure or pain? How might references to obtaining, cooking and

consuming food publically and privately provide new insights into how our interviewees' social relationships were constructed, negotiated and sustained? By venturing to 'taste their words', to what extent did the research reveal latent power discourses embedded in our interviewees' accounts of their formative residential experiences in the three English cities? Finally, might a research approach which foregrounds food centred memory here be transferable to other minority ethnic groups?

Relative to other aspects of the Irish migrant experience, our emphasis on food may on face value appear prosaic. After all, food is essential to survival and seemingly ubiquitous. But analyses of food consumption patterns do provide unique insights into the broader social, cultural and moral order. De Certeau argues that the 'impenetrable game of food behaviours and their miniscule variations from person to person, histories (cultural, social and familial) and memories superimpose themselves' (De Certeau 1998: 186). On a related theme, Bourdieu (1984) contends that tastes are socially constructed and may be differentiated by type, such as bourgeois, working class or popular tastes. Distinct food behaviours, such as sharing, serving, presenting are often linked to the maternal world. These behaviours remain constant over someone's life course regardless of space, place and time (Bourdieu *ibid*). When these patterns are disrupted by environmental constraints, the way in which notions of self must also inevitably change.

Significantly, existing research which focuses specifically on the Irish community in England confirms De Certeau and Bourdieu's claims. Both Delaney and McCarthy (2011) and Fitzgerald et al (2010) confirm the relevance of childhood

eating patterns in shaping Irish adults' food behaviours. When viewed as such, the case for exploring how the sensory qualities embodied in food behaviour relate to material and bodily culture becomes rather more compelling (Dietler 2001 and 2010). In proffering such a complementary approach here, we consider here the relative merits of sensuous scholarship as a means of both advancing 'a more social phenomenology and hermeneutics of senses of place' (Feld 2005: 179) and a medium through which 'the sensuous interrelationship of the body- mind- environment' (Howes, 2005:7) may be explored.

### **Research methodology**

We used the oral testimony paradigm to enable each interviewee to recount his/her housing pathways in England freely and without prescription. In total, we conducted twenty six interviews with first generation men and women who had immigrated to England from the Republic of Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s. The oral history method has long been associated with giving a voice to those whose stories have been hidden from history (Perks and Thompson 1998; Maye-Banbury 2016; Thompson, 2000). We were therefore aware of the potential rhetorical power of orality in advancing knowledge regarding previously undocumented aspects of the Irish migrant experience in the three case study cities.

Significantly, all references to food made by our interviewees were entirely unsolicited. It should be noted that the benefits and limitations of food-centred memory was not the primary focus of the study. Rather, we used the housing pathway framework (Clapham, 2002) to enable respondents to comment on their various house moves on arrival in England. We discovered that, in the vast majority

of cases (twenty four out of the twenty six interviews), these unique and highly personal accounts of our interviewees' housing histories were imbued with unsolicited sensory cues associated with food. We have therefore elected here to foreground men's engagement with food and more specifically, how the men's spontaneous reconstructions of food as an aesthetic and sensuous object provides insights on how they negotiated their sociocultural identity in their new surroundings.

We were interested not only the events that shaped the migrant experience but the distinct meaning assigned to these events by our interviewees. As such, the life history approach lent itself to understanding the life experiences of our respondents in a more holistic way than might have been the case with other qualitative methods (Batty 2009). Interviewer interjections were minimal, enabling the narrators to recount their housing pathways free from prescription (Kleinman 2007). When prompts were used, they were purposefully open-ended to enable the interviewees to recount their story on their own terms. Examples of interviewer prompts included 'Tell me about where you were born in Ireland,' 'Where did live when you first moved to England?' or 'What was that accommodation like?'

All interviews were recorded and verbatim transcripts for each interview were produced. The interview data analysis was embedded in a grounded theory and inductive approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Kenny and Fourie 2015). Hence, rather than starting with pre-defined categories, we mined the data inductively with a critical eye on migrants' actual lived experiences. In terms of research ethics, we endeavoured to observe the principles of confidentiality and anonymity at all times. We were also acutely aware of the potential sensitivity of the subject matter

and the possibility that the very process of taking part in our research would have an emotional impact on our respondents (Haynes 2009). We respected the privacy and dignity of our interviewees by being sensitive to their needs and wishes in the telling of their life stories (Kleinman 2007).

Until now, we have only eluded to the importance of food in creating and sustaining social identity in the Irish imaginary. We now begin to consider how the principles of Proustian anthropology help reveal create new insights regarding how the Irish community negotiate sociocultural identity in England's urban centres. We begin this exploration by using one detailed interview extract to reveal the relevance of Proustian scholarship to the Irish migrant experience. Then, using extracts from detailed oral testimonies of Irish men who migrated to Leicester, Manchester and Sheffield in the 1950s and 1960s, we consider how food provided and consumed in the boarding houses occupied by the men was used as an instrument of discipline, control and resistance. We discuss how the acts of hedonic eating documented in the interviews may be viewed as restoring elements of masculinity eroded by the migration experience. We then provide some concluding reflections and scope a further research agenda.

### **The power of Proust: madeleines, mnemonics and the migrant experience**

For many, the capacity of food to evoke memory is epitomised by oft - cited 'Proustian rush' whereby the narrator is transported back to childhood by the apparent simple act of dipping *les petites madeleines* in hot lime tea:



'But when from a long distant past, nothing subsists after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, *taste and smell alone* more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest...*the vast structure of recollection.*'

(Proust 1917: 53; our emphasis).

Ample evidence research evidence exists to show the potency of food to evoke the human memory. The sensuous potency of everyday fresh produce such as tomatoes and apples in stimulating memory forms the basis Jordan's (2015) research. Jordan's work highlights the importance of how 'edible memory' enables us to both unite discourses of past and present and transcend space, place and time. According to Jordan (ibid: 13), 'for many of us, food shapes who we are...the world is crisscrossed with powerful connections among memory, food and the places we inhabit.' In respect of the relative merits of food as a powerful stimulus in evoking the migrant imaginary, Sutton's (2001) concept of 'Proustian anthropology' provides compelling starting point. In a multilevel analysis based on his observations of the eating patterns of the inhabitants of Kalymnos, Sutton argues that dominant food memories constitute a 'form of historical consciousness' (Sutton, ibid: 26). The acute separation and isolation often felt by those isolated becomes enshrined in food related behaviour. For Sutton (2000: 123) *xenitia* represents 'a condition of estrangement, absence, death, the loss of social relatedness, or loss of the ethic of care seen to characterize relations at home' which becomes embodied as 'a physical and spiritual pain.' The longing for foods from home is described as the 'burning of

the lips' (Sutton *ibid*: 125), a powerful, enduring and compelling somatic experience. We concur with Sutton's assertion that analyses of food production, consumption and exchange provide a unique medium to review how expressions of sociocultural identity interface with individual and collective memory relevant to the Irish migrant experience in England. Sutton's sentiments are reiterated by James' (2002: 77) who contends that 'memories of home may linger, to be recreated in new localities through the medium of food.' Research undertaken by Vallianatos and Raine (2008) also illustrates the value of using the medium of food in showing how South Asian and Arabic migrant women negotiated their sociocultural identity.

Furthermore, we contend that our use of Proustian scholarship enables our interviewees to be the protagonists of their own individual stories, thus stabilising and contextualising their unique accounts within wider discourses regarding the Irish imaginary in England. Moreover, a consideration of food centred memory reveals the latent hero narrative in our respondents' personal accounts. It renders our interviewees' personal memories more burnished, more seasoned with the passage of time. When viewed as such, these social and emotional narratives, reproduced through patterns and rituals associated specifically with food may then generate additional insights in the importance of 'sensory knowledge' for the Irish in England. For Walmsley (2005: 55) '...sensory knowledge is developed through the sociality of food practices which are produced through the sharing of tastes, smells and the embodied culinary techniques.' Existing scholarship has been neglectful of the value in using this approach to frame the migrant experience. Stoller (1995: 636), for example, bemoans the extent to which tasteless theories' (have become) 'more important than the savoury sauces of ethnographic life. That they have lost their

senses of the smells, sounds, and tastes of the places...' Scholars such as Wise and Chapman (2005) and McCreanor et al (2006) remind us of the importance of how sensory and affective research provides new insights on the migrant experience, notably in respect of displacement and attachment to place.

### **A Proustian memory rush**

It is generally accepted that smell elicits more emotional responses than any other sensory cue (Herz 1997; 1998; Herz and Cupchik 1992). As Synnott (1991) suggests, smell, memory and meaning are inextricably linked and impact deeply on our daily lives. More specifically, the aroma of baking bread is known to be highly instrumental in stimulating the olfactory senses (Bowring 2006; Ward et al 2003). Food centred memories, as recounted by our interviewees, may therefore be instrumental in uniting corporeal, spiritual and emotional discourses of past and present within the very body itself. In the words of Proust, 'I can feel it mounting slowly; I can measure the resistance, I can hear the echo of great spaces traversed' (Proust 1913: 62). As this section will demonstrate, the aroma of home baked bread was a powerful stimulus in prompting Séamus to reconstruct memories of his childhood home in Tubbercurry.

For De Certeau, bread is less a basic food and more an important cultural symbol: 'Bread arouses the most archaic respect, nearly sacred; to throw it out; to trample over it is a matter of sacrilege' (De Certeau 1998: 86). The scent of baking bread evokes safety, security and maternal love (Counihan, 1999; Schifferstein and Blok, 2002). But bread also carries distinct Christian connotations. Significantly, all our interviewees defined themselves as Catholic. Christians seek spiritual

sustenance when partaking in Holy Communion, a bread based wafer. Biblical references highlight the importance of bread - 'Give us this day our daily bread' and 'man cannot live on bread alone' are but two examples which illustrate the interplay between bread and spirituality (Steel, 2008).

Yet, despite its ubiquity in the home, the capacity of smell to stimulate memory has been marginalised in existing research relevant to the Irish migrant experience. As Classen (1998) argues, smells have been discredited and deleted from intellectualised discourse, creating a sanitised and deodorized milieu seemingly not worthy of serious attention. But for many Irish children of Séamus' generation, recollections of the childhood home are infused with enduring memories of home cooked breads and cakes baked in an oven hung over an open peat fire. Given that the vast majority of bread was baked by Irish mothers, the sensuous suggestion of bread's aroma stimulates recollections of physical and psychological security enshrined in gestures of maternal love. Significantly, bread would have been one the first forms of solid sustenance eaten by most Irish children. Furthermore, both cooking and commensal eating would have taken place in the same small room in the home. Séamus' account which follows suggests an intimate level of knowledge regarding the bread making process observed at close quarters from what may be described his 'seat of sensorium' (Merchant 2011: 57).

Séamus was born in Tubbercurry, Co Sligo. He moved to Leicester in 1956. The invitation to reconstruct his housing pathways using oral testimony allowed Séamus to recall, uninterrupted, idiosyncratic and detailed somatic memories triggered by the recollection of his mother's bread baking rituals when he was a boy.

The interview extract below, reproduced in full below to illustrate the clarity of Séamus' recollection, strongly evokes the notion of the Proustian memory rush:

AMB: So tell me what brought you to England...

Séamus: Well, money. Work. And, well our parents and that, you know. I came from a big family, like. There was six of us. And my mother and father. We never bought any bread. They bought the tins for the flour, put at the back of the house and my mother baked. I can still smell her bread to this day - nearly eighty years on. And she had an open fire and we'd burn peat. When the cinders got right red in the centre, they took the cinders out, they'd put them in a space on the side of the fire. The fire was about that width (gestures about a foot long) and then she took the red cinders out of the middle. And she broke them down a bit and she put them in her oven. Oh, she hung the oven at the start so that it was preheated. And then she put the cinders down. And then she made her cake - her cake was about twenty one inches. And she had a lid and she put the lid on it, then put some more cinders on it. Then she had another lid. Then when she put the cinders again on top, she had about twelve inches or something. On top of that, she put the pan. She made a cake for the pan. That cake didn't come up so much. And she might bake two or three cakes on the pan whilst the others were baking.'

It is noteworthy that Séamus' recollection of the cinder kindling ritual in which both his parents engaged to heat the bread oven's embers is recounted with

reverence. Séamus' reconstruction of childhood place was stimulated by memories of burning peat, a quintessentially Irish sensory prompt. Moreover, his account provides important details about how the act of bread making shaped Irish domestic identities, a phenomenon considered further by Graham (2012) and O'Dowd (1994).

For Seremetakis (1993), the reconstruction of baking bread into distinct narrative acts enables the narrator as the protagonist to become a 'sense witness' (Seremetakis *ibid*: 14). In doing so, Séamus was empowered to reconcile any fragmented recollections, marginalised experiences or erased memories which, until then, had been consigned to his private memory. The act of rhetoric, therefore, facilitated through oral testimony, enabled him to navigate a shift from the internal to the external realm. The invitation to remember his childhood home enabled him to engage in a form of embodied spectatorship which united memory, body and soul (Esrock 2010; Vukov 2002). Consequently, it allowed him to articulate a continuity of sociocultural identity which his migration from Ireland to England had breached.

Séamus' account also provides valuable insights into the importance of synesthesia when reconstructing memories of his rural Irish childhood home. The potency of baking bread in evoking childhood is also captured by Proust (1917: 53) as smells 'changing with the season, but plenishing domestic smells which compensate for the harshness of the hoarfrost with the sweet savour of warm bread, smells lazy and punctual as a village clock, roving smells, pious smells, rejoicing in a peace which brings only an increase of anxiety in a prosiness which serves as a deep source of poetry to the stranger who passes through their midst without having lived amongst them.'

## **Food and identity in the 'boarding houses'**

The principles of 'Proustian scholarship' in respect of Séamus' quintessential and sensuous account of his mother's bread making in the family home have been highlighted in the previous section. Furthermore, our analysis of the men's food encounters in the minimalist boarding houses of the three cities revealed complementary but distinctive insights in respect of food hierarchies.. Significantly, the men's recounting of their engagement with food highlighted the importance of categories of food which exemplified their relative socioeconomic status. More specifically, our analysis of this categorisation highlighted: (i) a hierarchal categorisation of food which exposed ranging from soup at the bottom to meat at the top; cake and coffee were deemed luxuries (ii) the quantity of food eaten whereby respondents' accounts suggested a continuum of acute hunger and feasting (iii) the presence of a dialectic of control relative in respect of cooking and eating facilities, the offering seconds and disengagement with food as an instrument of resistance.

Our findings point to the importance of food in shaping the men's enduring memories of their formative residential experiences in England. As both Stoller (2010) and Waskul and Vannini (2008) suggest, in first person accounts, the narrator assigns hermeneutic meaning to his/her unique interpretation of events. Our analysis points to a hero narrative where the men, as protagonists on their own life story, self-presented as strong in mind, body and spirit. This narrative prevailed despite the low level of nutritious food provided in their formative residential accommodation and the heavy manual labour the men undertook from day to day.

On immediate arrival from Ireland, several of the men stayed in the euphemistically named 'boarding houses' in Sheffield, Leicester and Manchester. Gerard, originally from Belfast, characterised the first Sheffield property in which he lived as a 'working class boarding house.' For Séamus, his new temporary accommodation defied description: 'I don't know what you'd call them.' In reality, the boarding houses closely resembled a modified version of the American 'flop house' or 'rooming house' model of early last century commonplace in England just before the Second World War (Morgan 1962; Priest 1970; Slayton 1989). Existing 'flop-house' scholarship tends to foreground how Irish emigrants sought a new life in the USA and found work as manual labourers (Groth, 1986; Metraux, 1999; Perrigo, 1938; Schneider, 1989). Significantly, research has also highlighted the prevalence of similar accommodation in other parts of the world. Leerkes *et al* (2007) consider how the spatial inequalities epitomised by low budget boarding houses reflect wider socioeconomic inequalities in the Netherlands. Similar accommodation in Moscow for migrant workers at the turn of the twentieth century featured in research undertaken by Mazanik (2013). All in all, transient employment appeared to lead inevitably to precarious accommodation, low income and residential segregation from indigenous populations.

Accommodation in the boarding houses occupied by our interviewees was minimalist, precarious and unregulated. As lodgers, they were catapulted into new and transient interpersonal relationships, often with other Irish men. Our interviewees reported that the boarding houses were referred to locally as the 'Irish houses', a label which suppressed individuality by homogenising the Irish community in the



minds of others. Several of our interviewees reported dormitory style accommodation in small rooms. Some even shared a bed.

Gerard describes the crowded and chaotic living arrangements of the Sheffield boarding house in which he lived in 1962:

'She (the landlady) took in everybody under the sun, she took anybody in as long as they could pay the £2.50...she had a big house where there was probably about, at some given time, you'd be about fifteen or twenty blokes in the house 'cos there was a lot of big rooms and maybe three or four beds in each room...it was a free for all.'

Charles, who lived in several boarding houses over many years, recalls the dormitory style sleeping arrangements in one Leicester boarding house: '...there were about six of us in one room. In all old single beds.' Dónal's account of sleeping arrangements of the first boarding house in which he stayed in after arrival in Leicester resonated closely with both Gerard's and Chris' accounts: 'I'd say there was about twelve men. She had two in each room. Two, four, six, eight. There'd be 8 - 10.'

Our interviewees had very limited food choices in the three cities' boarding houses. Use of the kitchen to prepare meals, drinks or to socialise was off limits. Privacy was negligible and times rigidly controlled. Lodgers were expected to vacate the room immediately after breakfast and not return until the end of their working day. Surveillance by landlords/ladies was ever present.

## **Control of space: discipline and power**

Our interviewees' accounts suggest that food was used as part of the disciplinary machinery implicit within the boarding houses to manipulate behaviour, invariably to the landlord/ladies' advantage. Methods of serving food signalled a clear internal demarcation of space between lodger and landlord/lady. The 'dining room' was used only at meal times. Toilet and bathroom facilities were always shared. Lodgers were often forbidden from using the kitchen area for cooking, preparing hot drinks or socialising. Dónal's recollection of the living arrangements communicates this division of space and his sense of otherness as a resident: 'They would mostly keep you upstairs. They wanted the run of the place downstairs. That's their kind of their living room. They never changed that, the parlour. You couldn't go in there. She asked you in. That was their private space.' There was, however, some evidence of concessionary landlord/lady spatial behaviour in one Leicester boarding house. 'You could go down into her kitchen' (Dónal).

## **The culinary order in the boarding houses**

Most of the boarding houses provided meals which included breakfast, a packed lunch and evening meal included in the weekly charge. The food was generally of poor nutritional value, unappetising and involved minimal preparation. Portion sizes were tightly controlled. In Gerard's words, 'I was in a lot of places in digs... the grub was bad.' This sentiment was echoed by Séamus who suggested that the notoriety of the food provided in the boarding houses was enshrined in his family script: 'Like my brother says, you wouldn't put on a lot of weight. You'd more likely to be a grey hound than a fat pig... I had to make do with what I got.'

It is noteworthy that when asked describe the boarding houses, Brendan defaulted immediately to a food centric reference point: 'Well, there was a little bit of a dinner. There was more gravy than anything else. It was rotten.' Polite petitions for meat proved ineffectual. Dónal recalls asking one landlady: 'You'd pass a few remarks, you know 'Is there any meat?' something like that; nothing, no response. You'd never get nothing. All she'd feed you was cheese. There wasn't much going around.'

Our analysis suggests that the sensory cues which shaped perceptions of alimentation became heightened as our interviewees' began to feel the impact of food insecurity. Appetites were seldom satiated. Séamus described how 'food was in short supply...I could have eaten double what I used to get.' This perception reiterated by Dónal: 'There was a lack of food...there wasn't much going around... there was nothing to eat. It was hard to get food. You just couldn't get enough.'

### **Revulsion, revolt and resistance - rejection of imposed foods**

Our interviewees' enduring memories of the boarding house food was that it was unappetising, sloppy and carelessly presented. The contents of the 'packed lunch' provided by landlords/ladies proved particularly contentious. Dónal's description of the standard issue packed lunch is instructive. He recalled 'And the lunch consisted of a piece of bread and a piece of cheese. No butter. Just the cheese and bread. And she wrapped that up in a piece of paper. That was our lunch. That was all you got.'

Our analysis exposes how interviewees engaged in food related acts of resistance when negotiating the realities of everyday boarding house life. Analysis of Gerard's testimony shows that he and his fellow lodgers did not capitulate entirely to the food regime imposed by the boarding house, suggesting that a dialectic of control (Giddens 1986) helped them negotiate these early years in England. Gerard's description of the surreptitious daily ritual disposal of his packed lunch away from the landlady's gaze reveals his contempt for the food provided. Rejection of certain foods is a psychological and physiological defence against externally imposed contamination, captured in the old adage 'you are what you eat.' Before food enters the human body, it has already undergone considerable scrutiny. Fischler (1988: 280) reminds us that the mouth is the 'gateway of the organism, an orifice opening onto the depths of the body, the viscera...it functions more like a safety chamber.' For Gerard, the discarding of the packed lunch may be construed as an act of corporeal and psychological self-preservation based on mistrust of the food's provenance and the distinct context in which it was presented to him. It was an assertion of self-identity designed to reclaim in some control in an environment where opportunities to display agentic behaviour were few and far between: 'It (the rent) was £2.50 a week and that included a packed lunch in the morning time which, as a rule, the minute you came out of the house, you threw it over the hedge.'

Significantly, when other forms of protest have proved ineffectual, depriving oneself of food as a form of resistance is often seen as a last resort. Although hunger strikes are a well documented form of political protest in many countries, these narratives seldom feature in English culture. But they do form part of Ireland's national narrative. Sweeney (1993: 421) suggests that hunger strikes are an integral

part of Irish mythology linked to a quintessentially Irish 'religio-political martyrdom' which enables hunger strikers to join a pantheon of Irish heroes.' Gerard's account above suggests an act of food revolt and with it, a strong desire to physically and mentally extricate himself from the externally imposed force controlling him - and the food he consumed.

Our interviewees reported a range of improvisation strategies designed to negotiate the new eating regime with which they were confronted in the boarding houses. For Charles, the options were either to leave what was offered or find a way to make it edible: 'Well, if you didn't eat it, you left it. It was never great shakes but you just managed it.' Eamonn, improvised by trying to make consumption of the basic set breakfast menu more palatable: 'Well, you got your breakfast in the morning. Bacon and fried egg. I wasn't that keen on it. But I used to make it into a sandwich.'

Significantly, the disrespectful way in which fish or fish based food were served evoked invariably a negative emotional response from our interviewees. Séamus recalls how he disposed of his packed lunch on the days fish paste was foisted upon him: 'And then it was fish paste and I didn't like fish paste and that went in the bin.' Significantly, fish is one of the most important symbols in Christianity (Steel, 2008). Although a diminishing practice, many Catholics abstain from meat and eat only fish on a Friday to commemorate the day Jesus was crucified. Liam's enduring memory from the one and only night he stayed in a boarding house centred around the quintessential English way in which fish and chips were presented to him: "We had our tea – the first time I ever had fish and chips out of newspaper. Thought

that was terrible. At home, we'd have a plate. And this was a newspaper – I was thinking “oh, mammy” – a paper dinner" (laughs). For Liam, then aged 17, sleeping rough in one of Leicester's public parks was better than boarding house life. Local sex workers took care of him for the six weeks he slept rough then helped him find a hostel place:

'I wandered up to the park. All the night ladies were there. They got to know me and they were great to me. At home, we knew nothing about prostitutes, night ladies – we knew nothing. In the middle of the night, they'd come along and they'd bring me a sandwich, they'd bring you a hot drink, a cup of tea...might not seem like much now but it was world to me then.'

### **Food as a means to manipulate behaviour**

Komter (2007) and others provide a timely reminder of the extent to which the offering of gifts, including food related goods, implicates the receiver in implied reciprocity. Our findings suggest that food, on occasion, was used by the landlords/ladies as an instrument of implied reciprocity intended to control the lodgers' behaviour. For Dónal, the proffering of food by one landlady was seen as a means of communicating romantic overtures to his friend when the landlady's husband was working away from home: 'I think she took a liking to my mate. And she was 'Peter this' and 'Peter that.' 'Yes, Peter?' Or 'What can I get you, Peter?' Her husband spent more time away - he was doing something else.' Eamonn's suggestion that his landlord 'only gave me a cup of coffee when he wanted to chat with me' implies an intention by the landlord to manipulate behaviour with food. Boarding house life offered scarce opportunities for lodgers to engage in leisure activities. The landlord's attempt to monopolise Eamonn's scarce leisure time using

coffee implies a strong desire on the landlord to control multiple aspects of the lodgers' lives, including their free time.

### **Food in shaping perceptions of landlords/ladies' morality**

Many foods are considered to carry narratives which elicit specific emotional responses (Eertmans et al 2001; Gibson 2006) based on an existing social, economic and moral order (Classen 1998). For Dónal, the proffering of a slice of cake carried the hermeneutic connotation of rendering his landlady more affable: 'She gave us a bit of cake every Sunday, you know... She was nice. She was better than the first one.'

For Pádraig, the provision of home cooked meals prompted him to remain for a relatively protracted period in his minimalist accommodation. Bowlby (2005) contends that the forming an attachment bond to a maternal and/or paternal figure enables infants to explore an unfamiliar environment from within the constraints of a safe haven. The provision of this safety creates a debt of gratitude. Pádraig recalls: 'When we got home, she gave us an evening meal... it wasn't like mother cooked, put it that way. So I stopped in there for probably about a couple of years and I got on well.'

Dónal reported how the provision of good coffee, at that time a luxury commodity, by his landlord was a factor in protracting his stay in one Leicester boarding house: 'He made lovely cups of coffee. He was nice like that. We were there for a long time.' The act of drinking coffee, perceived as a luxury good relative to tea, is highly symbolic in nature. Coffee is generally perceived as celebratory,

pleasurable and indulgent. With its highly distinctive aroma, it is often associated with heightening the senses and consequently, the intellect (Verma 2013) thus giving credence to the saying 'wake up and smell the coffee.' Furthermore, one source suggests that the pungent smell of coffee provides a unique sensory trigger which induces relaxation, fellowship and camaraderie over and above any other smell (Hult and Van Dijk, 2009).

### **Soup, stigma and erosion of masculinity**

Although bacon did occasionally make an appearance at breakfast, the boarding houses' menus provided a predominantly vegetarian diet comprising white bread, cheese and potatoes. Soup, generally seen as first course/palate cleanser and highly cost effective, was often presented as a main meal the Leicester boarding houses. 'You use to get mostly soup,' recalled Dónal. Charles' recollection resonates with Dónal's: 'She'd (the landlady) would serve us boiled water with some vegetables in it - sure there was nothing to it.' Soup, normally of the vegetable variety, is deemed a subclass of a food division and carries connotations of pauperism (Douglas 1972). Consequently, soup was unpopular with the English middle classes for personal consumption as it suggested welfare dependency epitomised by the soup kitchen model (Burnett 2004). Consommé, on the other hand, is deemed much more palatable in every sense as a bourgeois starter which carries positive culinary connotations (Mennell, 1996).

### **Importance of meat in visceral sweeps**

The adherence to a vegetarian diet and/or favouring fish by men is often perceived as effeminate by other men (Adams 1991; Stibbe 2004). Conversely,



eating meat is perceived to measure virility, particularly amongst other men. Meat therefore carries multiple hermeneutic connotations of masculinity (Adams 1991; Rothgerber 2013; Sobal 2005;). Research conducted by Ruby and Heine (2011) suggests that social displays such as meat eating feasts are one way to validate perilous masculinity. It is also noteworthy that people are more inclined to indulge in hedonic eating acts when feeling frightened or insecure (Loewenstein 1996; Schachter 1968;).

Significantly, our analysis points to a dominant text of meats (Adams 1996) in the men's unsolicited accounts of the foods they considered most desirable once financial and spatial constraints had been lifted. Several accounts featured the consumption of meat off the bone. These meat centric feasts invariably took place in all male groups comprising either fellow lodgers and/or relatives. Dónal recounts the sensory delights when picking the cooked meat off the rib bones supplied by one Leicester butcher: 'We use to go down to a place called Wharf Street. It's down in the town...That was the meat. There was a bit of meat on them. And you'd get two sheets, a couple of sheets like that and boil them up...And we use to put them into a big pot. 'Twas great - great picking off them.'

For Séamus, the arrival of his brother from Ireland signalled an era of unprecedented food indulgence, signalled verbally by his use of a food related metaphor: 'And then...my brother joined me and then it was a different kettle of fish. I did the shopping and he did the cooking.' His brother's arrival gave him the mandate to indulge in regular weekend hedonic meat filled feast comprising steak and sausages: 'And I wouldn't like to tell you how much we ate. On a Saturday afternoon,

we'd be coming home from work. He'd go home and I'd go to the butcher. Pound of steak. Tea bone steak was only six shillings then. And we had three pound of it - and then we got some bacon'. As the local butcher's awareness of Séamus' meat centric feasting grew, he was given licence to queue jump, a gesture which restored some of Séamus' social capital which had become eroded: 'And he (the butcher) said "The next day you come, you don't stand at the back of the queue. You walk right up by my window." '

In another instance, the aroma of a cooked chicken left unattended in the kitchen of one Manchester boarding house proved too much for fellow lodger Colm devoured the entire chicken leaving only the bones as incriminating evidence. His fellow lodgers were relentless in reminding Colm of the incident. Gerard remembers: 'One night, I came in and I had a chicken I cooked for myself and (there were) bones... I didn't swear. He said 'I'm sorry, I was hungry' I says 'I was bloody hungry too', we'd say 'Can you remember when Colm ate nearly all your chicken?' They'd bring all things up.'

### **Rumours, food and insecurity**

We have highlighted above the scarcity of meat during our interviewees' early years in England. We have also suggested that meat consumed outside the constraints of the boarding house regime served to restore elements of masculine identity which had become eroded. Our interviewees' clearly discriminated between meats deemed acceptable and unacceptable for human consumption. Dónal indicated that, out of necessity, he had had to consume horsemeat, a product not commonly consumed in England in the 1950s and 1960s. His eating of horsemeat

therefore assigned a literal interpretation to the common saying 'I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse.' He recalled: 'There was no good meat. You were still eating horsemeat then. The meat wasn't same as it was at home..(where you) had your potatoes, cabbage and veg. And you had your bacon.'

Furthermore, food centred rumours in the boarding houses compounded the broader anxieties felt by our interviewees regarding the precarious nature of shelter, sustenance and employment. Dónal's testimony confirms Fiddes' (2004) claim that the human consumption of animals deemed as honorary humans (namely those animals with whom people have shared a domestic setting) is treated with contempt in Britain. Dónal was suspicious regarding the origin of the meat served to him by one Leicester landlady: 'One time, she gave us a bit of chicken...but it wasn't - it was a cat. There were an awful lots of cats missing. And they were saying that some people were killing the cats and that this was what was being put into the soup. Like the horsemeat - Jasis - horse meat. We use to say 'The cat's gone next door.'

### **Concluding reflections**

The study has shown how the principles of sensuous scholarship may be instrumental in revealing previously undocumented phenomena regarding the Irish migrant experience in Leicester, Sheffield and Manchester during the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, the men's recounting of their engagement with food highlighted the importance of categories of food which exemplified their relative socioeconomic status. When viewed in this way, food becomes a sensory and aesthetic object through which self-identity may be constructed, negotiated and revisited. As such, it becomes a medium through which public and private narratives relevant to

representations of the Irish imaginary in England may be explored. Our study has suggested how a research approach which foregrounds an architecture of the senses may be instrumental in advancing knowledge regarding Irish communities living in England during this period. The findings show Irish men's identities in England are shown to be heteroglossic, discursive and fluid constructs inextricably linked to memory, place and time.

The interplay between food, taste, smell and memory is complex. Although studies conducted by Köster et al (2004), Köster (2005), Fernyhough (2013) and Stoller (1994) recognise this interconnectivity, Western scholarship overall seems to favour analyses which foreground sight over and above the so called 'lower senses' of taste, smell and touch (Hamilakis 2002). Our own findings presented here challenge this orthodoxy. The analysis here has highlighted the importance of somatic associations, namely smell and taste, as reflexive expressions of the Irish sociocultural self in the three English cities. The study has suggested there is further potential to examine the way in which food accentuates the sensuous interrelationships between body and mind for the Irish in England and how this may shift over time and place. Furthermore, the hierarchal categorisation of food provides new insights regarding how perceptions by others of our respondents' socioeconomic status manifested itself through food. Significantly, a hierarchal categorisation of food emerged whereby some foods denoted pauperism and dependency (soups) whereas others suggested prosperity and liberty (meats). A dialectic of control in respect of cooking and eating facilities, manifested by the offering seconds and disengagement with food as an instrument of resistance, also unfolded during the course of the analysis. Furthermore, for our interviewees, the act

of eating was laden with collective corporeal and symbolic constraints, most acutely in the boarding houses. Their collective engagement with food was primarily reactive on three levels: as a source of solace from cultural alienation, as a means for restoring eroded masculinity and using agency as an instrument of resistance.

Accounts of food related memories also held maternalistic and paternalistic connotations, both of which evoked security from which an unfamiliar external world may be more safely chartered. This reassurance helped counteract the ill effects of the food centred rumours circulating in the boarding houses which compounded the broader anxieties regarding the precarious nature of shelter, sustenance and employment.

Our findings also point to the importance of conducting further research based on Irish migrants' recollections of boarding house life. To what extent did these experiences vary in the three English cities? How might Irish men's individual accounts of food consumption interface with historic and collective memory? How do these accounts compare with other Irish migrant experiences in similar minimalist accommodation in both other English and other countries, namely in the USA where thousands of Irish people moved to during and after the Great Famine era in the 1840s? How might a food centred focus reveal new insights regarding reconstruction and negotiation of Irish sociocultural identity on a more international level? Is there a case for using food to unite individual and historic memory in respect of accounts of the Great Famine era with the Irish migrant experience a century later in the 1950s and 1960s?

Our findings suggest that with our interviewees in the role of sense witnesses, food centred memory holds an innate power to stimulate latent *milieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989) in the voices of the Irish community whose accounts have been hidden from history. Our evidence points therefore, to the legitimacy of using sensorial mnemonics when framing otherness as one means of encapsulating the Irish men's reconstructions of how they negotiated their sociocultural identity during this period.

The hierarchal representation of foods consumed and the dialect of control in the boarding houses evokes Bourdieu's proposition (1984) that taste is a social construct which can reinforce or challenge sociocultural identity. This emergent theme also warrants further scrutiny. Additionally, the extent to which depriving oneself of food as a form of resistance appears integral part of Ireland's national narrative warrants further exploration. Might there be a case for using references to food to explore the role of corporeal and spiritual mnemonics when framing the Irish community's representation of sociocultural identity in England across multiple time frames?

Finally, might the principles of sensuous scholarship explored in this study be applied to other minority ethnic groups represented in England? Cervellon and Dubé's (2005) and others' cross cultural analyses explore how sensorial, affective and cognitive factors influence individuals' food preferences. Further research regarding the distinct factors which shape Irish migrants' food preferences relative to other migrant groups in Leicester, Manchester and Sheffield will provide further valuable insights on this theme.

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