

**Strangers in the shadows – an exploration of the ‘Irish Boarding Houses’ in 1950s Leicester as heterotopic spaces**

MAYE-BANBURY, Angela <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7710-5041>>

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**Published version**

MAYE-BANBURY, Angela (2018). Strangers in the shadows – an exploration of the ‘Irish Boarding Houses’ in 1950s Leicester as heterotopic spaces. *Irish Geography*, 51 (1), 115-136.

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# IG

Irish Geography

MAY 2018

ISSN: 0075-0778 (Print) 1939-4055 (Online)

<http://www.irishgeography.ie>

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Angela Maye-Banbury

**How to cite:** Maye-Banbury, A. (2017) ‘Strangers in the Shadows – An Exploration of the ‘Irish Boarding Houses’ in 1950s Leicester as Heterotopic Spaces’. *Irish Geography*, 51(1), 115–136, DOI: 10.2014/igj.v51i1.1354



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# Strangers in the Shadows – An Exploration of the ‘Irish Boarding Houses’ in 1950s Leicester as Heterotopic Spaces.

**Angela Maye-Banbury\***, Department of the Natural and Built Environment, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, S1 1 WB

*First received: 19 September 2017*

*Accepted for publication: 4 April 2018*

**Abstract:** Existing research regarding the Irish immigration experience in England tends to focus on the push and pull factors which promoted the search for a better life ‘across the water’ (Garrett, 2000; Ryan, 2008) or the specific mental and physical health experienced by the Irish resident in England (Aspinall, 2002; Raftery *et al.*, 1990). This paper adopts a different stance. Using Foucault’s concept of heterotopias (Foucault, 1986; 1994;) as a heuristic, the paper focuses on the ‘boarding houses’ of Leicester, England in the 1950s and 1960s in which many Irish men lived upon their arrival in England. Drawing on Irish men’s oral histories, I consider how these quintessential properties may be construed as worlds within worlds, placeless places and non-homes. The spatial and other strategies deployed by the landlords/ladies as a means of disciplining and controlling the lodgers are exposed. The paper also explores how the distinctive vernacular landscapes of the boarding houses were laden with multiple juxtapositions, including the interface between materialism and maternalism and productive/non-productive labour. The distinctive existentialist form of temporality evoked by men’s stories of boarding house life suggests that the passage of time was accumulated but never recorded.

**Keywords:** *Irish; immigration; housing; heterotopia; oral history*

## Introduction

Previous research regarding the Irish immigration experience in England tends to foreground key push and pull factors, which triggered emigration (Garrett, 2000; Garrett, 2003; Glynn, 1981; MacRaild, 1995; O’Carroll, 2015 and Ryan, 2008). The extent to which the Irish population in England experience mental and physical health problems relative to their English working-class peers and other minority ethnic groups also features extensively in existing scholarship (Aspinall, 2002; Delaney *et al.*, 2013; Harding and Balarajan, 1996; Raftery *et al.*, 1990). However, there is a dearth of scholarship regarding

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\*a.maye-banbury@shu.ac.uk

Irish men's formative residential experiences in post war Britain. This paper bridges that gap in the literature. Here, I consider how the euphemistically named 'Irish boarding houses', the low budget and minimalist properties occupied by Irish migrant men on first arrival to Leicester during the 1950s, may be construed as heterotopic spaces. I argue that these quintessential properties were products of modernity. The boarding houses were worlds within worlds, placeless places and non-homes in which the lodgers sought to both assert their identity and negotiate demands for conformity. When describing the variety of heterotopias, Foucault and Miskowiec, (1986, 26) wrote, 'there are other spaces that seem to be pure and simple openings, but that generally hide curious exclusions. Everyone can enter into these heterotopic sites, but in fact that is only an illusion: we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded.' The boarding houses designed for Irish immigrant workers in post war Britain are one example of such places. Extracts from the Irish men's oral housing histories are used in the analysis. The ensuing phenomenological exploration reveals previously undocumented aspects of the Irish imaginary in post war Britain through the decoding and recoding of semiotic space.

This exploration of the 'Irish boarding houses' as heterotopic spaces was informed by five interrelated questions. Firstly, to what extent are boarding houses and equivalent minimalist accommodation occupied primarily by migrant workers present in all cultures? Secondly, how might the Irish boarding houses be construed as pluralist sites of crisis, deviation and control? Thirdly, how do the men's stories reveal the multiple juxtapositions present in everyday boarding house life? More specifically, to what extent do these contrasts help us understand how Irish men negotiated their sociocultural identity in 1950s and 1960s urban England? Fourthly, to what extent do the men's accounts of boarding house life evoke a distinctive temporality whereby time was accumulated but seldom recorded? Finally, how might the boarding houses and the broader urban environment that the Irish men occupied in 1950s and 1960s Leicester be construed as contested spaces?

The paper is divided into four sections. Section one provides a summary of Foucault's thesis on heterotopias. The research methodology used in the study and specifically the use of the oral history method are outlined in Section two. Section three provides the primary analysis of the Irish boarding houses as heterotopic spaces. Here, the way in which boarding house and comparable rudimentary lodgings for itinerant migrant workers may be construed as non-homes and placeless places is reviewed. The extent to which the imposition of disciplinary and controlling regimes imposed by the landlords and ladies on their Irish lodgers evokes the Foucauldian concept of docile bodies (Foucault, 1984) is also examined. Section three also explores how the subversion of existing temporal practices in the boarding houses served to reveal the juxtaposition of elements in evidence present in everyday daily boarding house life. Finally, Section four revisits the central research questions posed and provides some concluding reflections on the relative merits of heterotopias as a heuristic in providing previously undisclosed insights regarding the Irish immigrant experience in post war Britain.

## Of Heterotopic Spaces

Foucault's three known accounts of heterotopic spaces are sparse yet instructive. His thesis on the subject blend ambiguity with highly vivid prescriptive and, at times, provocative references to specific examples of what he characterises as heterotopic spaces. The term heterotopia originates from the Greek 'heteros' ('heter' meaning 'another' and 'topos' translating as 'place'.) Foucault's first published work on heterotopias foregrounded, for the most part, textually constructed spaces (Foucault, 1968). His revised treatise on the subject, published later that year, moved into the realm of social spaces. His final documented reflections on the subject were published in 'Des Spaces Autres', translated as 'Of Other Spaces' (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986). Foucault (1994) considered the innate capacity of heterotopias to disrupt a utopian view of the world. They discombobulate us 'because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to "hold together"' (Foucault, *ibid*, 10). Subsequent accounts (Soja, 1996; Saldanha, 2008) have argued that heterotopias are more pluralist and holistic in nature.

Perhaps most significantly, heterotopias evoke ultimate places of otherness. Consequently, they are environments people occupy so that they may engage (either voluntarily or involuntarily) in counter mainstream experiences. Such places exist outside 'known' and, by implication, conventional worlds (*de dehors*) whilst remaining intact as 'worlds within worlds' in their own right. With ever changing *milieux*, heterotopias represent a 'reservoir of imagination' (Foucault, 1998, 185) laden with endless possibilities. Such places draw us out of ourselves, allowing us to participate not to say experiment in socially orchestrated performances in distinctive ways. They both unite and compartmentalise disparate groups, giving them the curious property of being simultaneously connected and disconnected to all other *emplacements*. Foucault's thesis on heterotopic spaces suggests, therefore, that he did not conceive them to be continuums of place. Rather, he characterised them in a relatively prescriptive way whereby there was clear delineation between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the place in question. However, in this paper, heterotopias will be explored more holistically with a specific focus on the interrelationships between people, place and modernity.

Furthermore, Foucault urges us to countenance that heterotopias may possess distinctive temporal qualities. Capable of traversing space, place and time, heterotopias are, in the words of Defert (1997, 275), 'spatio-temporal units' through which, in certain circumstances, rites of passage may be performed. Examples of such places are festivals, brothels and boarding schools. These places may challenge or even exceed our expectations, intensifying our life experiences in the process. They subvert temporal relations to the extent that we become disassociated from prevailing norms and instead are catapulted into surreal and existential worlds of otherness. Heterotopias dissolve when the social relations which created them shift – in effect, they suspend, neutralise, or reverse the very set of relations on which they are founded. By contrast, Lefebvre saw heterotopias as a prerequisite in servicing modern industrial society as with it, the

inevitable creation of spatial inequalities (Lefebvre, 1991; 2003; 2004). In the words of Lefebvre (2003, 125), heterotopias create environments of ‘contrasts, opposition, superpositions and juxtapositions replace separation, spatio-temporal distances’.

In summarising his heterotopic thesis, Foucault foregrounds six interrelated principles: (i) Heterotopic spaces have a universality, which traverses cultures; (ii) Heterotopias evolve from scenarios underpinned by critical incidents to create crises. Boarding schools and homeless shelters fall into this category. Crisis places, he contends, morph into places of deviance over time to become, for example, prisons or detention centres; (iii) They contain a juxtaposition of elements; (iv) Normative temporal relations are suspended and instead heterotopias contain ‘slices of time’; (v) Heterotopias open and close at appointed times with access controlled by the imposition of a fee or strict gatekeeping; (vi) The distinct characteristics of heterotopic spaces become accentuated when viewed relatively. Significantly, heterotopias may embody some but not all of the characteristics referred to above, rendering some ‘fully’ or ‘highly heterotopic’ (1998, 182) and others to a lesser degree. As Johnson (2013) argues, heterotopias are diverse in nature with different combinations of space interacting to create a dynamic of their own.

The section, which immediately follows, reviews the methodology used in the study. Then, an exploration of Irish men’s everyday life in the boarding houses of Leicester framed by Foucault’s concept of heterotopias, is presented.

## Methodology

The findings presented here arise from an oral history study intended to document the oral histories of the Irish in Leicester, Manchester and Sheffield informed by the housing pathway approach (Clapham, 2002; 2005). The oral history method gives a voice to people whose accounts of past events have been misrepresented, marginalised or indeed excluded entirely from existing literature. In the oral history paradigm, the interviewee is given centre stage so that s/he may recount past events free from prescription (Maye-Banbury and Casey, 2016; Casey and Maye-Banbury, 2017; Perks and Thomson, 1998). The method allows the researcher to consider why the interviewee reconstructed and indeed ‘re-presented’ his/her unique story in a particular way. As Goodchild *et al.* (2017) emphasise, Gadamer’s (1989: 302) characterisation of oral history as a ‘hermeneutic conversation’ is instructive in that it reinforces the claim that it is the intended meaning which lies behind the words which merit our attention as much as the actual words themselves. Since its inception in August 2014, the study has documented a total of 36 detailed oral housing histories of Irish men and women in the three English cities. The initial 14 interviews conducted with Irish men in Leicester revealed the importance of the budget ‘Irish boarding houses’ (as they were known locally) during their formative residential years in post war Britain. Ten follow up oral history interviews were then conducted with those men who had lived in the boarding houses when they migrated ‘across the water’ in the post war period. Eight of the men were born in Connacht, namely Mayo (Achill Island, Castlebar, Mulranny and Westport), Sligo (Mullaghmore and

Tubbercurry) and Galway (Tuam). One interviewee was from Dublin and another from Tandragee, Armagh. Typically, marriage or (less commonly) co-habitation signalled the end to boarding house life.

## Heterotopias Present in all Cultures

The research critically assessed Foucault's claim that rudimentary shelter, such as minimalist lodgings for transient migrant workers may be construed as heterotopic spaces capable of traversing cultures. The analysis has revealed the substantial body of evidence, which exemplifies the importance of 'boarding house' style accommodation in different countries in servicing the political economy across space, place and time.

Many terms are used to characterise minimalist style lodging type accommodation designated primarily to migrant workers at the global level. Language is culturally specific and remains critical in shaping our exposure to and engagement with discourses of power, discipline and control (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991; Fairclough, 2001; 2003; Habermas, 1984). As Foucault (1970: xviii) suggests, when analysed through the medium of language, heterotopias discombobulate us as they 'desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilise the lyricism of our sentences'. The hegemonic qualities embedded in the various terms used to denote 'boarding house' style accommodation are, therefore, worth consideration. More specifically, the hermeneutic interplay between morality, capitalism and welfare across cultures and their relevance to broad characteristics of 'boarding house' style accommodation merit review. In Scotland, for example, the term 'lodging houses' is used to denote lodgings for migrant workers (McCance and McCance, 1969; Richardson, 1956). Priest's (1970) UK/USA comparative review of temporary accommodation for the impoverished manual labourers refers to 'boarding houses' in the English context but switches to 'doss houses' or 'flop houses' when depicting Los Angeles' notorious Skid Row.

The interface between migrants' geographies of precarity and globalisation is well documented (Tyner, 2016; Sayin, 2017). The northern political economy, notably from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, drew heavily on migrant labour in servicing ideological goals (Stalker, 2000; Yeates, 2009). Migrant workers generally occupied accommodation at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale on arrival in their host cities (Castells, 1975; McCauley, 2005; Wu, 2004). Boarding house style accommodation and its equivalent designated to migrant workers endures today at the global level. Leerkes *et al.*'s (2007) study considered how the spatial inequalities epitomised by low budget boarding houses occupied by migrant workers reflect wider socioeconomic inequalities in the Netherlands. Manazik's (2013) study of migrant workers in Moscow at the turn of the twentieth century showed how transient employment appeared to lead inevitably to precarious accommodation, low incomes and residential segregation from indigenous populations. Today, rural migrant workers recruited to China's urban centres to service a buoyant economy are commonly housed in large dormitories owned by their employers.



These workers are largely demonised by the local urban population (Wong *et al.*, 2007). Other studies have identified the importance of temporary lodgings for Irish emigrants over the years who travelled to the USA and subsequently found work as manual labourers (Modell and Hareven, 1973; Peel, 1986). All in all, with precarious housing and employment came high levels of food insecurity, a lack of affordable warmth and fragmented sets of social and intrapersonal relationships. The men whose oral history extracts are featured here were exposed to this multi-level precarity. Indeed, our previous research has revealed how boarding houses located in the English cities of Leicester, Sheffield and Manchester and similar minimalist accommodation for transient workers in other countries played a vital role in providing housing for Irish immigrant workers for many centuries (Casey and Maye-Banbury, 2017; Maye-Banbury and Casey, 2016). In the English context, research has critically explored the prevalence of mental health problems amongst Irish manual labourers, specifically the psychological impact when occupying the land of a colonial power (Bracken *et al.*, 1998; Hillier and Kelleher, 2002).

## Heterotopias of Crisis and Deviation

Foucault's thesis on heterotopias urges us to countenance that with the passage of time, heterotopic places may morph from sites of crisis to places of deviance. Some places are deserving of the 'crisis' classification in that they are 'privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis' (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986, 24). As societal norms decree, these distinctive spaces become occupied over time by those society deems morally reprehensible. In such places, everyday behaviour is tightly regimented to ensure occupants are disciplined and controlled. Prisons, borstals, psychiatric hospitals, homeless shelters and boarding schools are all cited by Foucault as cases in point.

Securing employment was the primary preoccupation of the men whose oral history extracts are featured here. They travelled extensively in England occupying numerous boarding houses along the way. Some of the men had arrived in London initially but then moved to find work in other parts of England, namely Coventry, Sheffield, Manchester and Preston. Seamus, born in Tubbercurry, reported how he had stayed in 20 boarding houses in just under three years before his arrival in Leicester in 1956.

Significantly, the Irish boarding houses were well known amongst the local Leicester community. Seamus recalls: 'We just asked a bloke and he said: "All the boarding houses are up there."' Tomás' accounts also reveal how the boarding houses were known to provide emergency accommodation in Leicester: 'You just walked out of the station and people would tell you'. The importance of word of mouth featured in Seamus' recollections of securing boarding house accommodation: 'Word of mouth. Friends would get to know each other and fix you up. I was in a room for a while'. In a similar vein, Eamonn recalled:



‘You just... when you got off at the station as far as I can remember, you come outside and you asked somebody if there were any lodgings. We used to call them “lodgings”. Boarding houses. And they’d say “up the road, turn your left – there’s a load of boarding houses there. So we went, knocked on this door and this woman...she put us up. And she charged about £2.50 something like that.’

With no security of tenure, the Leicester minimalist lodgings featured in this paper most closely resembled dormitory style homeless night shelters than any other housing tenure type. For example, in keeping with hostel residents, the Irish lodgers’ ability to access social and financial capital associated with enhancing life opportunities was much compromised (Mayer, 2003) or came with risks and/or personal cost (Stablein, 2011). Moreover, those occupying such minimalist temporary accommodation enjoyed little ontological security (Bird *et al.*, 2017; Sommerville, 1992; Young, 2000) or felt unable to occupy their housing as though it is truly ‘home’ (Giuliani, 1991). The lodgers spent weeks, sometimes months, living in highly cramped conditions. Each boarding house commonly had between 2-6 single beds in each bedroom. For reasons of economy, some even shared as bed, known as ‘bed hopping’ where sleeping time was negotiated around shifts. Remembering the overcrowded living conditions, Gerard said: ‘And there were about nine or ten of us in the digs there. But there were about six of us in one room. In all old single beds.’ Colm recalled: ‘I’d say there was about twelve (men). She had two in each room. Two, four, six, eight. There’d be 8-10.’ This level of severe overcrowding was confirmed by Eamonn: ‘She (the landlady) had a big house where there was probably about, at some given time you’d be about 15 or 20 blokes in the house cos there was a lot of big rooms and maybe three or four beds in each room’. Our interviewees’ enduring memories of the landladies communicate a distinct form of wretchedness which contributed to the men’s oral reconstructions of their lodgings as non-homes and placeless places. Their accounts evoke Dear and Wolch’s (2014) analysis of how asylums and workhouses in Western capitalist countries have evolved and, in particular, how cheap lodgings, tenements and homeless shelters may be construed as an extension of these institutions. Seamus recalled: ‘The landlady there – really miserable. She had a flat upstairs.’ Colm’s memory of his landlady also evokes someone of a miserly nature: ‘She was a miserable old so and so, she was. She hardly ever spoke to us, you know “Hello – how are you?” You’d be sat at the table with other people and had your soup and stuff like that.’

Daily boarding house life centred around rituals such as meal times, curfews and ousting hours rendering them rhythmic and repetitive spaces of representation. For Bourdieu (1982) and Dear and Wolch (2014), ritualisation is crucial in determining the distinctive temporality necessary for sustaining institutional structures. When framed as such, the Leicester Irish boarding houses are congruent with Goffman’s (1959, 11) definition of institutions as places of ‘residence where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life’. Significantly, analysis of the

men's testimonies reveals a round the clock continuum of productive and unproductive labour. Each day was dominated by a regime of gruelling manual labour. Other than occasionally attending dance halls and going to mass on Sundays, what little leisure time the men had was spent within the confines of the boarding house. Most evenings were spent recovering from a hard day's work in their lodgings, either in their rooms or in the communal sitting area. The men participated in modest cost effective pursuits such as playing cards, dominoes or simply gathered around an open fire engaged in conversation. Furthermore, shift work meant that when the shops or other leisure amenities were open, the men would be resting or sleeping in preparation for the next day's emotional and physical haul. Seamus explained: 'And really you hadn't got that much money. We never really went out heavy drinking. We didn't have the strength. Me and me mate didn't have a penny between us.' For Colm, entertainment could be found inside the boarding house in the company of other Irish men. 'The house was full. A lot of them were Irish kids from all over the place and it was a good craic at night time. After the weekend was over we were generally skint so we'd be sitting in the big room downstairs with the fire.' Jimmy said: 'There was a sitting room with a fire and a table where we had the meals and we'd be smoking. Nobody would be having any money to go out for any beer not because they'd spent it all over the weekend but because they sent it home to their parents as I used to do.'

Contrary to the stereotype of the heavy drinking Irish immigrant, those interviewed seldom frequented pubs: 'And we thought it wasn't worth going out drinking – have nothing for tomorrow'.

The men took their work responsibilities seriously. Talking about his drinking habits, Colm said:

'I did (drink) but not a lot, 'cos you had to be fit going down, you wouldn't want any effects of any alcohol, wouldn't chance it. You had to have your wits about you down there and your mates as well, watching what you were doing and the roof condition at different times, you had to be quick'.

Dónal found the Leicester pub culture alienating:

'We'd go into a pub. They never had nice drink... the drink was absolutely rubbish. It was horrible even to look at, never mind drinking it. That was it. There was no atmosphere in the pub. Nobody... you just went in. Nobody said "hello" or "how are you?" And you went into the pubs, they wouldn't serve you. They looked at you and said: "We're not serving you, you're nothing but trouble". And you had that in a lot of places.'

## Food, Discipline and Control

The daily sustenance served routinely by the landlords/ladies in the boarding houses further legitimises the claim that the Irish boarding houses had the hallmarks of heterotopic spaces. Food may be experienced as a source of both pleasure and punishment (Maye-Banbury and Casey, 2016; Smith, 2002), as well as a potent means of externalising resistance and rebellion (Maye-Banbury and Casey, *ibid*). More specifically, as we highlighted elsewhere (Maye-Banbury and Casey, *ibid*), food served in the ‘Irish boarding houses’ revealed a wider prevailing social, cultural and moral order. The way in which rationed food is the norm in punitive environments is well documented (Godderis, 2006; Morris and Morris, 2013). Furthermore, deprivation of food is seen as one way to punish the ‘other’ (Morris and Morris, *ibid*). Significantly, in 1950s England, even prison food was subjected to stringent quality control checks to ensure it was ‘of a nutritional value adequate for health and strength and of a wholesome quality well prepared and served and reasonably varied’ (Morris and Morris, *ibid*: 31). Yet no equivalent checks were in place to safeguard the quality and quantity of the food served in the boarding houses of 1950s and 1960s in urban Britain.

The food served in the boarding houses reveals a distinctive social, moral and cultural order. Séamus suggested that both himself and his brother were aware that the food was in short supply in the lodgings: ‘Like my brother says, you wouldn’t put on a lot of weight. You’d more likely to be a greyhound than a fat pig... I had to make do with what I got... I could have eaten double what I used to get’. This perception was reiterated by Dónal: ‘There was nothing to eat. It was hard to get food. You just couldn’t get enough’. Gerard explained: ‘I was in a lot of places in digs... the grub was bad.’ Our interviewees’ testimonies suggest that food was used to discipline, emasculate and infantilise the lodgers’ bodies. Meat carries hermeneutic connotations of virility, masculinity and affluence (Sobal, 2005; Rothgerber, 2013). The fact that meat-based meals seldom made an appearance in the Irish boarding houses suggests a pre-emptive covert attempt to neutralise masculinity, thus controlling any voices of dissent. Daily sustenance provided in the boarding houses was largely vegetarian, very cheap to produce and lacking substantial nutritional content. Dónal’s repeated polite petitions for meat fell on deaf ears:

‘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.’ In some cases, our interviewees recalled how they had hid food; replicating behaviours reported in prison settings (Ugelvik, 2011).

It was striking that soup was served several times a week to the lodgers, masquerading as a main meal. Historically, soup has carried hermeneutic connotations of poverty and welfare given its associations with welfare dependency epitomised by the soup kitchen model (Douglas, 1972; Murcott, 1994). ‘You used to get mostly soup,’ recalled Dónal. Charles’ recollection reiterated the prevalence of soup on the boarding house menus:

‘She’d (the landlady) would serve us boiled water with some vegetables in it – sure there was nothing to it.’ Significantly, even main meals were soup-like in their liquidity content. As Brendan reported: ‘Well, there was a little bit of a dinner. There was more gravy than anything else. It was rotten.’

Engagement with some foods and rejection of others may be seen as analogous with a strike for liberty. As Mintz (1996, 34) postulates, ‘the taste of freedom sounds so empyrean, noble (or ennobling); the taste of food, so ordinary, so material... but these ‘tastes’ are not really so remote from each other.’ Analysis of the men’s testimonies suggests food behaviours had a performative function, notably as a means of restoring social and cultural capital, which had become eroded following emigration from Ireland. The men reported how they conspired to extricate themselves from the provided ‘packed lunches’ (typically a fish paste or cheese sandwich wrapped in newspaper) at the earliest opportunity. These cognitive ruses were highly symbolic in that they enabled the men to disassociate themselves from any lingering sense of the boarding house environment as soon as they had left for work in the morning. Gerard described the daily ritual of how he and the other lodgers would dispose of the contentious packed lunch: ‘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.’ Tomás recalled how he would invariably throw the fish paste sandwiches into one Leicestershire river as soon as he got off the bus. ‘Straight into the Soar it (the packed lunch) went. The swans could have it – there was no way I was going to eat it myself.’

Significantly, when the embargo on financial and spatial constraints was lifted, the men described how they would engage in hedonic meat-based feasting, preferring to eat the meat off the bone. These meat-centric banquets took place invariably away from the landlord/ladies’ gaze and always involved other Irish men who were either lodgers or relatives from Ireland who had come to visit. Séamus, defaulting to a food related metaphor, recalled:

‘My brother joined me (from Ireland) and then it was a different kettle of fish. I did the shopping and he did the cooking. And I wouldn’t like to tell you how much we ate... Pound of steak. Tea-bone steak was only six shillings then. And we had three pound of it. And then we got some bacon from another place, cut a large piece of bacon.’

## Contested Spaces – Power, Discipline and Control

The analysis shows how power, discipline and control were negotiated as an intrinsic aspect of everyday boarding house life. Lodgers existed in what seems to have been a state of near constant landlord/lady panopticon like surveillance. Additionally, the lack of privacy in the boarding houses meant that they were either under surveillance by their landlords/ladies or housemates when eating, sleeping and even bathing. In one boarding house, even the act of bathing was conducted in the communal kitchen

area. Furthermore, the distinctive spatial regime, notably the strict demarcation of space, ensured both psychological and corporeal compliance, and reinforced the lowly socioeconomic status of the lodgers. Christopher remembers: 'She (the landlady) kept the bottom place. That was all hers. And the rest of it were all for lodgers. What used to be called lodgers'. Describing the upstairs arrangements, Gerard recalls a similar rigid division of space: 'All you had in there was lodgers. She was down below. You never saw much of her family – they kinda kept in the background'. Dónal recalled: 'The rooms were upstairs. They would mostly keep you upstairs. They wanted the run of the place downstairs. That was their private space'. However, some minor spatial concessions were made. 'He (the landlord) said you could come down and make yourself a tea and a coffee. That was about it.'

The men's oral histories reveal how the landlords/ladies sought to manipulate their lodgers' behaviour by controlling how and when the men engaged with their minimalist lodgings space. Better rooms were promised in exchange for compliance with house rules. Analysis of the men's accounts also suggests that the landlords/ladies were in a perpetual state of alert, expecting deviant behaviour. They implemented routinely pre-emptive steps to neutralise any acts of recalcitrance. One way in which they manifested this moral panic was the imposition of both opaque and irrational house rules. Dónal recalled: 'She had the key and she made them little rules. "Don't bring back anyone here." "Try and get in before twelve!" – not every night. Just some nights. And all that carry on'. Colm's description of life in another Leicester boarding house resonated with Dónal's enduring memories. Speaking about the rule that banned overnight guests, he reported: 'He (the landlord) said to me I wasn't to bring anyone back at night time. My wife's brother –and he objected to me bringing him back'. In a similar vein, Eamonn recalled how his brother was asked to leave even though he only visited Eamonn on a few occasions: 'And he came back with me a couple of times. And he said: "You can't bring him back – he's going to have to go." He wasn't doing any harm'. Charles' account confirmed the perpetual culture of landlord/lady vigilance: 'The landlady – she was watching out. She'd know if you were in. Or if you'd brought somebody in. She was watching all the time.' Charles became resigned to the residential regime, suggesting an objectification and normalisation of the rules imposed on him by one Leicester landlady: 'Oh, you tended just to stick to your room. I never brought back anybody.' Such exercising of technologies of power (Foucault, 1990) blur the distinction between formal and informal mechanisms of control to the extent that the lodgers went to great lengths to ensure that they did not incur the wrath of the landlord/lady. Even when the lodgers made every effort to abide by the house rules, many of which were opaque, they still bore the brunt of landlord/lady wrath, resulting in one of the lodgers, Colm, being evicted. He recalled:

'And I was coming in a bit late. I was on the afternoon shift. And I would take my shoes off. 'Cos she used to sleep in the front room downstairs. She said: "You've got to get out". She said I was waking her up. Coming in maybe about 1 o'clock. But she wasn't even in that room but I took my shoes off at the bottom of the stairs and crawled in my socks.'

## Disciplined Docile Bodies: Sanitation and Hygiene in the Boarding Houses

As heterotopic spaces exemplify counter positionality, they foster self-reflexive behaviour. Foucault's use of the analogous mirror illustrates this quality:

'In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself... such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy'

(Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986: 24).

Analysis of the men's oral housing histories reveal how they began to become moulded into a discursive ideal, a compliant and docile other. A stark example of this phenomenon is how the men found themselves adopting minimalist hygiene regimes in keeping with their rudimentary accommodation. The men's accounts of their shared bathroom and toilet facilities suggests an unremitting squalor. Tomás described how two toilets and one bath was shared amongst 15 men: 'They (the toilets) weren't very... you know with 15 blokes coming in and having a few pints, you can imagine what the toilets were like'. Gerard's account of his fellow lodgers' toilet habits violated his sense of propriety to the extent that he did not last one night in the boarding house:

'So anyways, the night went on. What were they doing? They were using the sink to pee into. Never seen anything like it. Poor as we are, you went out to the basin in the scullery. And you got the water out of the barrel outside the front door. And you washed in that. I wasn't shaving then even at 17'.

Gerard elected to reject his new boarding house environment. He recalled: 'The next morning I left – and I told the lady "I'm not stopping"'. Gerard left his new 'lodgings' in the middle of the night. For six months, he slept rough in a park frequented by local sex workers until one of them found him a hostel place in a former navy hut.

Gerard remembered the ad hoc nature of taking a bath: 'It was a lot of blokes so you just waited till it was free or somebody would say "I'm having a bath tonight"'. Unlike bathing rituals at home in Ireland where modesty prevailed, privacy was negligible. Colm described how he had to bath publicly in a tin bath in the kitchen:

'I use to come home pit black and you'll laugh at what I'm about to tell ya. They had this bath hanging on the wall outside – copper. We'd bring it into the kitchen in the corner for the hot water, put a curtain up the size of that picture there' (gestures to picture 0.3m x 0.15m or 1 x 0.5 feet).

In other cases, the lodgers publicly declared their intentions to have a bath to ‘claim’ the bathroom. As landlords/ladies charged money for doing laundry, the men deferred the request for freshly washed bed linen. Consequently, as Dónal suggested, the men tolerated squalid conditions in an effort to save money. ‘We never washed the sheets or nothing like that. We’d ask her to do the sheets. They would be really dirty before we’d ask her.’

## Juxtaposition of Elements: Maternalism, Materialism and Misery

Foucault’s central thesis considers the importance of the juxtaposition of elements in creating and sustaining heterotopic spaces. If judged on their exteriors alone, the grand Victorian bay fronted facades located in gentrified parts of Leicester suggested respectability, affluence and desirability. But any illusion of grandeur was soon shattered as the Irish migrant men experienced the realities of boarding house life within hours of moving in. Moreover, if the men did have expectations that their new environment would be nurturing and supportive, these expectations were soon violated. In reality, maternalism interfaced with materialism on a routine basis as the landlords/ladies conspired to profit from the men’s poverty. Seamus was under no illusions about the landlord/lady’s primary motive in providing lodgings: ‘They were there to make money’. Eamonn, echoing this sentiment, recalled: ‘You took what you got. Just the bed. And if you wanted something else, you’d have to have paid more money’. Gerard reported: ‘She took in everybody under the sun. She took anybody in as long as they could pay the £2.50’. Colm remembered: ‘Landladies then were just in it for the money’.

The landlords and ladies who ran the boarding houses had the dual capability of enticing the men in, in the first instance, alongside the ability to evict them at a moment’s notice with little or no explanation. Over time, in keeping with the principles of heterotopic places, the boarding houses became sites of deviance with both lodgers and landlords/ladies engaging in relatively mild acts of recalcitrance. Against house rules, lodgers smoked in the bedrooms. They reported, with some mirth, burning wellington boots as fuel for the open fire. They smuggled in overnight guests well away from the watchful eyes of the landlords/ladies. At the same time, the men believed that they were being defrauded by their landlords/ladies who, they alleged, rigged the fuel meters on a regular basis. Colm remembered: ‘He used to collect the rents. And he used to rig the meters. Unlock the meters and get all the money out’. Gerard reported: ‘The landlord, he was greedy. He used to break the gas meter open and take the money we were owed. He’d try and fiddle it’. Dónal’s account also spoke of similar avariciousness: ‘The landlady was a bugger for the gas meter. You’d get very little for your 50p or your 10p you put in there. You’d no sooner had it in than it was gone’. Seamus said: ‘You’d put so much in the gas meter. You’d get nothing. Nothing back’. There was some evidence of landlords/ladies exploiting the men’s lowly socioeconomic status to obtain fuel. Seamus, a coal miner, recalled: ‘If you were in a flat, you’d get a ton (of coal) every six weeks. I didn’t charge her



anything because I got it buck cheap. So she gave me the red book to show I was renting out a flat... But I wasn't. I got her a ton of coal every six weeks'.

The men's descriptions of boarding houses' décor evoke a moribund placeless place, a non-home with few redeeming features. Although clearly culturally and context specific, the extent to which interior décor and design impacts on occupiers on an emotional level is well-documented (Birren, 2016; Elliot and Maier, 2014; Evans *et al.*, 1996). Dónal's graphic description of the first Leicester boarding house in which he lived evoked a lifeless-residence with a monotone décor more commonly associated with institutions such as hospitals or prisons:

'It was dead. There was nothing. There was nothing nice about it. It was old fashioned, old house, old curtains, all dull. Nothing. I think they only used the same colour. Everyone had the same colour house. There was no pink or green or anything like that. Basic'.

Similarly, Colm's recollections of one boarding house interior evokes a lacklustre interior of a lifeless and neglected property:

'It was dead. There was nothing fancy about it. Dead wallpaper. It had been there for years. You didn't walk in and say: "Oh Jaysus, this is lovely." You walked in and said: "Oh Christ, the bed's OK." You put your hand on the bed and away you went'.

Furniture was minimalist and functional: 'Oh, there was nothing in the room. Very basic. Just a bed, wardrobe and a chest of drawers' (Colm). Perhaps most starkly, for Seamus, the boarding houses defied description: 'I don't know what you'd call them'.

For many, time spent in garden spaces engenders peace, tranquillity and self-possession. For Foucault and Miskowiec (1986, 25), the garden is a space 'more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center.' Significantly, although all the boarding houses had designated garden areas, our interviewees viewed these spaces as part dead zones, which, in effect, only served to augment the existing heterotopic interior space. Colm recalled how an entire floor separated the lodgers from the landlords/ladies, making any outside garden space even more remote: 'No garden. Never seen it. We were upstairs. All their's was all down there... all that... you've no right to go down there'. Dónal's account concurred with this view of the garden as a dead zone: 'I never seen a garden... the people who were there lived in the back. I never seen any garden there'.

## Temporality in the Boarding Houses: Productive and Non-productive Labour

Spaces may be construed as ‘heterochronic’ when they embody complex and dynamic snapshots of time, which subvert conventional temporal practices. These ‘*decoupages du temps*,’ (Foucault 1998: 182), the literal translation of which is ‘slices of time’, are alluring, fleeting and minimalist, leaving nebulous temporal footprints in their wake. Foucault cites carnivals, festivals and circuses as cases in point. By contrast, other spaces such as modern museums, art galleries and libraries accumulate multiple layers of time assembled in one space. Pugliese’s (2009) examination of biopower in Lampedusa and Christmas Island is an apt illustration of how prevailing public and private narratives of place may contain such inherent temporal contradictions. Such places allow us to explore place as ‘an ensemble of relations that makes them appear as juxtaposed, set off against one another, implicated by each other – that makes them appear, in short, as a sort of configuration’ (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986, 22).

The Irish lodgers lived in an existentialist state of flux and flight. They chased employment opportunities around the country, negotiating relentless regimes dominated by work, eat and sleep in the process. Consequently, daily life was lived using a different set of expectations. For example, the men left no visual imprints on their surroundings in the boarding houses. Significantly, they reported without exception, that no material artefacts or personal mementos to externalise an extension of self were displayed in their rooms. Such behaviours suggest the men’s utter detachment from the boarding houses as place. Moreover, they arrived in England with minimal belongings. When asked about what personal possessions he had on arrival in England, Gerard replied: ‘Just a bag. I only had the shoes I had on my feet. Maybe a shirt and trousers. Maybe a pair of socks. Nothing, nothing else’. Equally, Colm reported having minimalist possessions: ‘All you needed was a bed and a pair of boots. If you weren’t in one, you would be in the other’.

## Opening and Closing: Shifting Social Citizenship

Foucault suggests that entrance to heterotopic spaces may be controlled through the imposition of a fee, referral process, a gatekeeper or other special mandate. Therefore, they are spaces highly regulated by gatekeepers opening and closing at specific times so any claim to accessibility is illusionary. For those interviewed, emigration may have given the illusion of freedom. But in reality, they occupied an ambiguous space time continuum and, as such, were strangers in the shadows trapped both inside and outside the boarding houses. In the words of Foucault (2006: 11), they were prisoners ‘in the midst of the ultimate freedom, on the most open road of all, chained solidly to the infinite crossroads’. On the one hand, as their services were called upon by the political economy, notably in low-skilled, manual labouring positions, the city of Leicester invited them in. On the other, they were imprisoned by a form of colonial Otherness, manifested in a racialisation of their migrant labour.

As we have documented elsewhere, emigration from Ireland to England in post war Britain was buoyant due to multiple push and pull factors (Casey and Maye-Banbury 2017; Maye-Banbury and Casey, 2016). The British Nationality Act 1949 enabled the Irish to move with ease ‘across the water’. Servicing a political economy distinct to time and place as part of a colonial other, the men interviewed for the research lived largely on the margins of a society in a world in which systems of productive and non-productive labour, power and control were already firmly established. They were citizens on the margins and strangers in the shadows, occupying an ambiguous position whereby they were invited into some established settings to service ideological goals but were, for the most part, excluded from the professional classes. Studies undertaken by Hickman (1998) and Hickman and Walker (1997) expose the complexities of institutional racism experienced by the Irish in England. More specifically, such research demonstrates how cultural and religious differentiation was used to justify acts of racism on a routine basis. As Hickman (1998, 290-291) observed:

‘both the colonial racism stemming from Anglo-Irish relations and the construction of the Irish (Catholic) as a historically significant Other of the English/British (Protestant) have framed the experience of the Irish in Britain. Historically, anti-Irish racism in Britain has comprised both elements of racism described above’.

The invisibility of the Irish relative to other minority ethnic groups (Ghail, 2000; Hickman, 2007; Hornsby-Smith and Dale, 1988) compounded their powerlessness by excluding them from the provisions of most anti-racist policy regimes. Consequently, the men’s ability to assert their identity as citizens occupied an ambiguous positionality. On the one hand, Leicester as a city was ‘open’ to the men as regards providing opportunities for them to work as manual labourers. Yet relative to Ireland, the men found the Leicester urban landscape inhospitable, rendering it a largely inaccessible urban space. Colm remembered:

‘It (Leicester) wasn’t a nice place at that time. It was very dull and dark. And they were very strict with rules. The shops, you know and things like that. The shops were very strict about closing times... The shops never really stayed open until late. And after ten o’clock, things just closed up then’.

Dónal’s enduring impression of the city also suggested gloominess: ‘The streets were darker’.

## Concluding Reflections

This paper has shown how using Foucault’s concept of heterotopias exemplifies the realities of Irish men’s residential experiences of everyday life in Leicester’s ‘Irish boarding houses’ during the 1950s and 1960s. The men’s stories, therefore, serve as

counter narratives to existing hegemonic explorations of urban space occupied by the Irish men during this period. The invisibility of the Irish to other minority ethnic groups in England (Ghail, 2000) further legitimises the use of a heterotopically informed framework in representing otherness. When viewed as such, the men's stories reveal previously undisclosed layers of spatial semiotics, which show the critical importance of these vernacular landscapes in reconstructing accounts of the Irish immigration experience during this period in England. Analysis of these eyewitness accounts reveals a distinctive form of existentialist phenomenology, which allows us to decode and recode specific aspects of the Irish imaginary in post war Britain. Consequently, the findings suggest how the Irish imaginary in England may be construed as Kantian in nature in its 're-presentation' of space by occupying both real and unreal worlds simultaneously.

Certainly, in keeping with one of the key tenets of heterotopias, there is evidence that boarding houses and their equivalent are indeed present in many cultures, notably in those societies with developing economies. At the local level, the men's accounts show the diversity of boarding houses in respect of size, culture and geographical location. More globally, the boarding houses and their equivalent share a universalism in that they were intended to provide accommodation for migrant workers recruited expressly to service the political economy. Migrant workers providing manual labour are likely to occupy housing at the very bottom of the socioeconomic ladder not dissimilar to hostels for the homeless. Collectively, these properties create a contemporary layer of fluid and flexible heterotopic spaces occupied by those who have limited social and financial capital.

Furthermore, the framing of the men's accounts of boarding house life as heterotopic spaces has exposed the extent to which the boarding houses were sites of crises and deviation containing a juxtaposition of elements. The boarding houses embodied heterochronic qualities in that both productive and non-productive time was accumulated but seldom recorded. Emigration from rural Ireland, where the economy was lack lustre, to post war booming urban England in 1950s, may have created the illusion of freedom of choice. But, in reality, during the boarding house days, the men's social interactions were confined largely to a twilight society, negotiating multiple heterotopias on a daily basis.

Undoubtedly, their low socioeconomic status and limited social, cultural and intellectual capital fettered their ability to become part of the more respected working-class groups in their adoptive cities. Yet, it would be disingenuous to characterise the boarding houses as dystopian landscapes specific to time and place. The men's oral histories suggest that humour, alongside with resourceful acts of resistance, served as an antidote to the harsh realities of boarding house life. In reality, therefore, the men experienced a rich pluralist and dynamic sense of place. However, the men were pioneers who paved the way for others to explore the relative merits of immigration to England. Significantly, young Irish people are more likely to explore global opportunities if their families are predisposed institutionally to social mobility mediated by emigration (Cairns *et al.*, 2013). Certainly, immigration of the Irish to Leicester has continued steadily since the post war period as a 'new wave' of highly educated Irish elect to live and work in the city (Leicester City Council, 2012).

At the time of writing, demand for migrant labour continues to rise in the global level (Lewis *et al.*, 2015). At the same time, housing provision is beholdingly increasingly to neoliberalist ideologies which, by their very nature, marginalise the role of state sponsored housing allocated on the basis of need rather than ability to pay (Ronald and Lennartz, 2015; Scanlon *et al.*, 2015). In an era where immigration is becoming more rigidly controlled, current and future generations of migrant workers are likely to continue to occupy some of the world's most marginalised and minimalist housing. In the process, these workers will likely become part of a new hyper-precarious generation (Standing, 2016) excluded from the central tenets of social citizenship on a routine basis (Lewis *et al.*, 2015). Nearly fifty years on, Foucault's words have lost none of their prophetic qualities. 'The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed' (Foucault 1968, 22). Such epochs, therefore, are likely to feature strongly at the global scale for many years and, indeed, centuries to come.

## Acknowledgements

My thanks to the staff, volunteers and members of the Emerald Centre in Leicester for their invaluable support in enabling me to complete the oral histories which informed this paper. I owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Barry Goodchild at Sheffield Hallam University for feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. I am grateful to my colleagues from the Oral History Network of Ireland (OHNI) for their insights following my presentation of an earlier iteration of the paper at the OHNI Annual Conference in Galway, June 2017. Thank you also to Dr Rionach Casey, formerly of Sheffield Hallam University with whom I co-led this research in its early years.

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