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Personal lives: narrative accounts of Irish women in the diaspora

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The burst of writing about Irish women in the diaspora after the 1980s, led by Mary Lennon, Marie McAdam and Joanne O'Brien's *Across the Water: Irish Women's Lives in Britain*, coincided with the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences and literary representation. This paper uses Carol Smart's concepts of *Personal Life* (2007) – memory, biography, embeddedness, relationality and the imaginary – to examine a range of ways in which personal narratives have become central to our understandings of Irish women and their descendants in both written and visual representations. It interweaves disciplines, bringing together a wide range of sources including academic and public accounts in which Irish women appear both as main characters and in walk-on parts. It explores constructions of these 'fictions' and their connections with the biographies of authors.

Keywords: personal lives; memories; life stories; secrets; embeddedness; connectedness

This paper offers a reflection on the ways in which Irish women in the diaspora have been recorded and represented in print and visually over the last twenty-five years. It takes as its starting point the publication in 1988 of *Across the Water: Irish Women's Lives in Britain*, by Mary Lennon, Marie McAdam, and Joanne O'Brien, which in many ways ushered in the new wave of academic work researching this topic. The small number of books and articles published before this, most notably Hasia Diner's *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* in 1983, took an impersonal, thematic approach relying on historical documents.¹ By contrast, from the late 1980s detailed accounts of individual women's lives became the chief lens through which explorations of women's experiences in the diaspora were viewed. Not surprisingly, these representations were based overwhelmingly in Britain where migration continued to be on a large scale.

There were many interlocking reasons for this change, related mainly to the rise of second-wave feminism. Both political activists and feminist academics argued that women's reproductive and productive roles were overlooked and taken for granted. Absence of recognition and record meant that only women themselves could provide the data about their lives, which would inform analyses and complete the picture. Even more important was the belief that women should be empowered to express views in their own words rather than allow 'experts' to interpret experiences on their behalf. Precursors to *Across the Water* were the London Irish Women's conferences starting in 1984, where women staked a claim to recognition, speaking publicly about their lives as migrants 'not just to insist on our existence in English surroundings, but to insist on it within our own Irish community'.² Contributors included both guest speakers and workshop participants who shared their personal experiences informally, a summary being printed in booklets with small circulations. The publication of *Across the Water*, closely followed in 1990 by

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Ide O'Carroll's *Models for Movers* recording the lives of diasporic women in the USA³ and in 1992 by Sheelagh Conway's *The Faraway Hills are Green*, which drew on life stories of women in Canada,⁴ presented such personal accounts formally to global audiences for the first time.⁵

Concomitantly, narrative approaches were entering academic epistemologies with a renewed intensity. There was an established history of this kind of research;⁶ however, life story work took on new life with the theoretical development of symbolic interactionism in the social sciences.⁷ Qualitative methodologies, especially interviewing and focus group discussions, grew in popularity while in the humanities oral history gained a certain degree of respectability. Whilst disciplines approached the question of recording life stories differently – oral histories were seen as documentary evidence based on the semi-structured memories of specific named individuals whereas the interviews conducted by social scientists were anonymised and thematised – over time the two often merged and borrowed from each other. Thus Sharon Lambert, as a historian, described her approach as oral history, but anonymised her forty participants in Lancaster and draws out themes from their life stories,⁸ whilst Louise Ryan used oral histories from a sociological perspective in her reconstruction of the working lives of ten Irish nurses.⁹

In all these cases women's accounts of their lives are mediated through the co-constructions of the stories by participants and researchers. As Ryan argues, they are 'composed' to fit in with the contemporary lives of the storytellers.¹⁰ Thus, in many ways, they are fictions, constructed out of selective memories, choices about what to reveal, and interactions between teller and listener. In *Across the Water* the authors critically interrogate issues of editing the transcripts of their oral histories, raising questions of editing, standardisation of language and ethical rights to participant censorship.¹¹ This re-writing brings them much closer to the world of literary fiction, which in turn draws on the real life experiences of writers either directly or indirectly. My paper explores ways to link these different narrative uses of 'real' lives. It also broadens issues of presentation and readership to non-academic audiences by considering other ways in which Irish women's lives were brought into the public arena, including newspaper coverage of life stories of Irish women and popular biographies.

What is always at work is authorship and creativity. Authorship may be claimed by writers and academic researchers, for example, but is shared with participants. The background of all the authors is crucially important to what is produced, though this may not be acknowledged. In many cases the interviewer shares an Irish background and gender with the interviewee. In the Introduction to *Across the Water*, for example, the three authors explain: 'We were all from Ireland, had lived here for between six and ten years, and had known each other for a while.'¹² Reflexivity is actively engaged in by academics working in the social sciences.¹³ Thus, as a sociologist, Breda Gray clearly specifies her immersion in the specific processes under analysis:

My research encounters and journeys involved reflection on the many differently located and contradictory ways in which I had taken and continued to take up the position of 'Irish woman'.¹⁴

Ryan, also a sociologist, explored in depth her assessment of the impact of her own Irishness on the interviews she conducted with elderly women who had worked as nurses.

The interviews were framed by the interpersonal dynamics between me – a woman in her thirties who had left Ireland in the 1990s – and these women – approaching ninety who left Ireland in the 1930s.¹⁵

She commented on the significance placed on her accent – was it strong enough? – and her status of married motherhood – important for approval – in gaining the confidence of her interviewees.

My own situation as an ‘English’ social scientist is unusual, indeed ‘anomalous’ in Liam Harte’s survey of ‘the phenomenon of authors of Irish descent using their own biographies and family histories as a touchstone’.¹⁶ I use a more extensive auto-ethnography to locate myself in my research, which includes interviews with Irish women, with whom I share gender but not ethnicity. I argue that it mirrors the experience of women whose everyday lives intersect with the ‘indigenous English’ as well as reciprocally constructing English lives:

My own family background appears to have no Irish connection, but I am closely related to the story I tell. My ‘Englishness’ is mutually constituted with ‘Irishness’, but in ways which are so deeply embedded they have to be teased out of very mundane situations.¹⁷

Below I shall explore the ‘English’ backgrounds of writers in other genres who represent the lives of Irish women.

By contrast with social scientists, historians seem less fully committed to interview data. Joe Lee in his foreword to *Irish Women in Lancashire 1922–1960: Their Story* reminds readers that ‘Sharon Lambert’s approach is not the only possible one. But in putting a human face on the emigrant experience, she rouses our interest from the outset.’ He also commends her generously for ‘a rare sensitivity’ and ‘a combination of emotional with academic intelligence vouchsafed to few’.¹⁸ Lambert reflected in detail on her own role in conducting oral histories. She explained that, unlike feminist historians Karen Olsen and Linda Shopes¹⁹ who saw the need explicitly to counter their privileged position as academics by emphasising commonalities between themselves and their interviewees, she took the opposite perspective: ‘I was more conscious of the similarities than the differences between myself and the interviewees and saw my background as an asset to interviewing Irish women in Lancashire.’²⁰ She listed ways in which her own life story resonated with those of the women she spoke to in religion, social class and the occupations of three generations of her family, and illustrated the impact on Maureen:

Her main perception of me was that I was a woman from working-class Lancashire with a Sligo father, features which I had in common with her. My academic persona was so irrelevant to her that being reminded of it during the interview surprised her.²¹

Joe Lee’s metaphorical reference to ‘a human face’ reminds us of the ever-present bodies of Irish women. A particularly interesting way in which life stories are grounded in the real world is through the use of photography and film, where visual evidence of women’s embodiment gives an extra dimension to the words on the page. This is explored most explicitly in *Across the Water* where the equal weight given to visual and written texts is clearly stated in the authors’ descriptions of the book as a ‘photo-text’ and as ‘different women’s voices and pictures as strands in the overall story’.²² They explain that the value of pictures is their greater accessibility to a wide audience and in conveying experiences ‘which cannot be expressed in other words’. The balance is echoed by Sarah Pink who argues that, methodologically, ‘While images should not necessarily replace words as the dominant mode of research or representation, they should be regarded as an equally meaningful element of ethnographic work.’²³ Many life story texts use photography in a less sustained manner, as an optional extra to the main written texts.

Photographs of diasporic Irish women fall broadly into three categories. First are professional portraits created specifically to connect closely with the stories. Joanne O’Brien analyses the process by which portraits were produced in dialogue with the

storyteller for *Across the Water*. She observes that participants often chose to present themselves formally, wearing their best clothes.²⁴ They embraced this as an opportunity to become visible and wished to be evaluated seriously as people of worth. The second category is photographs of everyday lives, professional and amateur, matching the neglected areas of women's lives, which are unrecorded in written texts, including work, leisure and everyday activities. Finally, many published volumes, especially biographies, include pre-existing family snapshots provided by the storyteller, which again provide a wealth of additional information about contexts, for example by clothes and hairstyles.²⁵ They are often used to record family occasions and thus connect across generations. Older snapshots are usually taken in the summer when people gathered out of doors, on holidays or for particular events. The age and lower quality of film, as well as their 'well thumbed' condition, means that these may be harder to interpret, but many are lovingly preserved and enter into the memories of subsequent generations.

The telling of women's place in the Irish diaspora through individual life stories is well illustrated in the video series *The Irish Empire*, issued in 2000.²⁶ The third volume was entitled *A World Apart* and was presented quite differently from the remaining four.²⁷ Although some time was spent painting a broader picture of women's lives through the words of expert 'talking heads', the most arresting element was detailed accounts of the lives of individual women in different global locations. Each reflected on her life as an Irish woman in the USA, Britain, Australia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. At the end of the video, close-up photographs of the faces of the nine women panned across the screen reinforcing the impression that these stories encapsulated women's diverse experiences. The director Dearbhla Walsh had chosen the biographical approach which synthesised visual images with spoken narratives, explaining that 'the very personal female experience of migration to Britain, USA and Australia primarily will become the prism through which the documentary will explore the world of difference between the old home and the new home'.²⁸

Personal life stories thread through academic representations in the social sciences and history, but a parallel concern with real lives of Irish women in the diaspora underlies literary writing, both factual and imaginary. Formal biographies and autobiographies are the most obvious sources, but at an informal level media articles may use life stories to illustrate themes such as migration, or more directly provide accounts in obituaries. Finally, novels where Irish diasporic women feature as characters draw on and embellish authors' personal knowledge of selves, family, friends and acquaintances. In all these cases the lives of Irish women are brought into the public sphere and made available to general readers to identify with the familiar or encounter as new worlds.

Bringing together the variety of sources may reveal interweaving and overlaps between apparently discrete genres – both within academia and at academic/public interfaces – through their shared attention to memories, emotions, visual images and imagination. I shall explore the possibilities for making these links offered by Carol Smart's theorisations in her 2007 book *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking* in which she challenges current disciplinary orthodoxy summarised as the individualisation thesis.²⁹ This thesis follows Giddens and others' claim that 'social action is increasingly mediated through and by the individual person'.³⁰ Instead, Smart argues for greater recognition of the importance of connectedness and relationality in people's lives.

Personal Life: theories of connectedness

Connections are particularly relevant to the lives of diasporic Irish women in England. These include, first, the connections between Ireland and England which lie at the heart of

the diasporic experience. Even where these are disavowed or neglected they continue to resonate powerfully and to re-emerge throughout the lifecycle. Second, women are particularly strongly connected to families, including past generations, often seen to be their gendered concern and responsibility. Finally, within communities, both in Irish and more mixed neighbourhoods, women are often both the glue and lubricant of social relationships and activities. These connections mean that personal lives are not simply private and individual but have wider significance at the national, local and household levels as well as over time. In all these ways individual lives are inextricably linked to wider social processes.

Interestingly, Smart chooses to open her exploration of the sociological significance of connectedness with a personal account of her family photographs:

Some years ago I became the keeper of my family's photographs ... Having inherited them I then found I could not throw them away either and so they lived for about two decades in the same plastic bag until I was left with another batch from a maternal aunt – this time kept with slightly more reverence in an old sewing box. I was prompted to start sorting them, a task as yet unfinished. In the processes I found myself going through a journey of the imagination, of memory, of emotion and of history.³¹

She describes a particular photograph of her grandparents which gives her a sense of connectedness across the generations in a number of ways, including small physical resemblances, the picture's location, which was close to where she was herself raised, and new understanding that her own upbringing had been influenced by the ways they parented her own father. But she continues: 'Although I feel all these things and these emotions are real to me, I also know that these connections and impressions are largely works of personal/cultural fiction.'³² In arguing that dealing with family photos 'is not simply a hobby, but part of an active and culturally specific production of the self', Smart links the apparent 'hard data' of photographic records of real lives with the realm of the imagination. Again this blurs the boundaries between the social sciences and literary fiction in the construction of life stories.

The identification of key themes through which the social significance of personal lives may be examined provides a useful framework within which to intermesh different approaches. Smart selects five concepts, which are overlapping and mutually invested in each other: memory, biography, embeddedness, relationality and the imaginary. Each of these concepts has specific meanings for Irish women in the diaspora, which can be identified in the varied forms by which their lives are represented publicly. In each case Smart demonstrates that connectedness is far more important than is usually acknowledged.

Memory is central to the life story approach. Smart argues that although memories appear to be highly individual, they are acquired interactively, that is socially, so that our personal memories are both collective and individual. They are deeply linked to our emotions, which explains why particular events are remembered and forgotten. Our earliest and most intense memories are formed in the context of families, which shifts the family to a special place in internal calibrations of personal significance. Families are the context in which we learn what to remember and what to forget and rehearsing family stories creates strong bonds, even if these can also feel restrictive. This is reinforced by the tracing of family heritages, which is increasingly popular, but also has a long tradition in oral Irish culture. So the stories that Irish women tell about their lives have been created through interactions with other people. But they are also selective – some parts of the story have been hidden by collective agreement, for example stories about adoption or 'illegitimate' motherhood, particularly resonant in the Irish case because of punitive religious regulation.

The concept of *biography* again references far more than an individual timeline. It introduces the theme of movement through time and Irish women's relationships to changing contexts as they themselves age. Moreover, movement through time has its own materiality as people acquire and retain objects, which elicit memories. When women are interviewed in their homes they are often surrounded by belongings, which accrete over time, including family and perhaps religious memorabilia as well as photographs, which, although mundane, have distinct cultural resonances. These constitute further visual as well as tactile accompaniments to life stories, perhaps especially important to migrants whose baggage was necessarily restricted.

A particularly rich concept is that of *embeddedness*, which extends the notion of biography to that of 'linked lives' across generations. Smart points out that individual lives are influenced deeply by previous generations, which 'helped form the apparently unique individual who was in fact taking forward part of the past'.³³ Irish women are brought up in families where their early years are influenced strongly by the culture and values of the previous generation. This overlap is particularly relevant to second generations in Britain raised in households with migrant parent/s where the culture of the home may be in marked contrast to that of the outside world. The notion of embeddedness reflects the tenacity of these bonds and links where family members, close kin and friends, including those who have died, can feel 'part of me'. Family ties are often expressed in remarks about inherited characteristics. These may be physical resemblances – for example 'Irish looks' – as well as aptitudes, faults, and shared values, which continue to be remarked on in the face of growing individualisation. In families, people relate these continuities particularly to blood relationships, privileging genetic explanations. This offers another visual element, which may be recorded more permanently in photographs and film, but is also simply observed as a daily presence.

The notion of *relationality* refers to contexts of particular people and places in which everyday life unfolds and thus extends outside the immediate environment of family and household. Particular people may include friends and neighbours, who are not formal kin, and places are closely connected with senses of identity and belonging. The concept of 'born and bred' denotes the central significance of both genetic and environmental factors in people's formative years.

The fifth interlocking concept is labelled the *imaginary*, which already moves us closer to the language of fiction although it relates here to everyday life. One application is to the specific ideals people hold, for example about family life. The expectations we have affect what we try to achieve and the criteria by which we measure ourselves. This is well illustrated by Irish women's group discussions about forming relationships and bringing up children in England. Gray describes young middle-class women in London who wanted to reproduce an 'Irish' family life, but believed this would not be possible. She describes this as 'anxiety about cultural continuity' because 'the absence of an Irish childhood for their children represents a loss'.³⁴ Distress about lack of embeddedness is evident here as the mothers fear that there would be a disjuncture between the two cultures: 'If my kids grew up here they would *see me as being Irish*, and having a bit of a funny accent, but *they would grow up English* and their kids would be English ...'.³⁵

These five concepts emphasise different strands of personal life, but overlap and intersect with each other, helpfully displayed by Smart as a Venn diagram.³⁶ Whilst each has a wide application across genders and cultures, each also resonates in culturally specific ways with the lives of Irish women in the diaspora. The themes provide a framework drawn from the academic discipline of sociology, and have been linked here to qualitative interview and oral history material, but their widely understood meanings

allow them to be extended to constructions of life stories in a range of other arenas of which three will be explored in more detail here.

Public narratives: biographies and autobiographies, obituaries and literary fiction

Biographies appear to be the most obvious source of detailed and reflective information about Irish women's lives in the diaspora, but there are remarkably few. Attempting to compile a bibliography of Irish migrant autobiographies, Liam Harte noted:

Hopes of uncovering a hidden body of work by, say . . . working-class women writers in post-war London evaporated as the gapped nature of this literary seam became clear. As it is, male autobiographers significantly outnumber their female counterparts, leaving one to regret the fact that so few Irish nurses left accounts of their migrant experiences and bemoan the paucity of memoirs by domestic servants, despite their ubiquity in Victorian Britain.³⁷

Whilst women are underrepresented in this genre overall, Irish women are even less likely to occupy public positions than women in more dominant social classes and ethnicities and less frequently offer printed records of their own lives than Irish men.

More commonly, Irish women appear as mothers and wives in other people's life stories. An extreme example is 'Kim' in Blake Morrison's acclaimed recovery of his mother's hidden life in *Things My Mother Never Told Me*.³⁸ Harte neatly summarises the central theme: 'Part memoir, part biography, the book explores the embeddedness of an Irish presence in an English social landscape by tracing the appropriation of one Catholic woman's identity by a particular brand of xenophobic Protestant Englishness.'³⁹ When she meets her husband, Blake's father Arthur Morrison, Catholic Agnes agrees to accept the new, bland non-Irish name 'Kim' as part of the wholesale renunciation of origins, accent and religion in which she is complicit. The invisibility was so complete that even her son was unaware of half of his heritage. Agnes's/Kim's story is unearthed and presented by him after her death. The damaging consequences for her are powerfully signalled by the inapplicability of Smart's concepts to her personal life. No references to her own memory can be retrieved because they were never expressed to those around her. Her biography has been painstakingly reconstructed by her son from letters but has major gaps. Perhaps the most striking loss is that of embeddedness in the next generation. The relationality of 'Kim's' Irish background was actively denied and her life in England was manufactured to please English others. Acknowledging the importance of visual records, Morrison notes how the absence of Irish family photographs exacerbated the erasure of the past: 'The remoteness was increased by the lack of photographs. There were none dating from my mother's childhood. What did her parents look like? I'd no idea, and wasn't encouraged to ask.'⁴⁰

More positively, but on a smaller scale, Irish women appear in subordinate roles in the biographies of others, often their own children. A more substantial reconstruction appears in the 'English actress and novelist'⁴¹ Julie Walters's autobiography *That's Another Story: The Autobiography*, which recounts the influence of her Irish-born mother on her own childhood in the English Midlands: two life stories are thus intertwined, those of an Irish migrant and her second-generation Irish daughter. The book opens with her mother's celebrations of Julie's birthday, the Irish accent being noted at the outset:

'Five years ago today . . .'

It's my mother's voice. She is at the foot of the stairs, calling out the story of my birth, as she did on so many birthdays.

'Ten years ago today . . .'

It is Irish, a Mayo voice worn at the edges, which, she told me once, some men had found alluring.

'Fifteen years ago today ...'

Now it is soft with memory and buoyant with the telling.⁴²

Like many of the second generation Julie had mixed parentage, Irish and English, but she says 'I notice that I constantly refer to my mother and far less to my father.'⁴³ In stark contrast to Morrison's deeply attenuated inheritance from his mother, Julie Walters's autobiography illustrates especially vividly Smart's concepts of personal life. The notion of embeddedness across generations is clearly illustrated above, but each of the other themes also resonates strongly. Memories are selected to provide a coherent narrative and the notion of a biography developing relationally over time in the specific context of neighbourhood and local region is central to the story. The publication includes a wealth of family snapshots which provide portraits of different generations of the family as well as stages of Julie's career.

Another nationally acclaimed 'English' public figure⁴⁴ is the author Hilary Mantel, whose *Giving Up the Ghost: A Memoir* (2003) documents the childhood centrality of her third-generation Irish heritage. Suddenly announcing in her story: 'I used to be Irish but I'm not sure now', she illustrates the strong influence of her Irish grandmother Kitty O'Shea, great-grandmother Catherine Ryan, and their numerous children, over her early years.⁴⁵ Later she explains: 'And as my great-uncles and great-aunts died one by one, I lost my consciousness of being Irish.'⁴⁶ The importance of embeddedness is clearly illustrated, its fading significance linked here to her developing biography. Much more pervasive is the ongoing influence of her Catholic inheritance in both her memoir and the semi-autobiographical novel *An Experiment in Love*.⁴⁷

An unknown number of cases of Irish women taking larger and smaller 'walk-on parts' in the vast sea of other people's life stories will only be accessed by chance. Some forms of biography appear in even more ephemeral forms, for example a small sample of stories, which I have encountered serendipitously whilst reading the *Guardian* newspaper over the years. An article entitled 'Tales of Belonging' in 2008 offered a range of brief stories about migrants in Britain and included a woman who moved from Galway to Leeds in the 1970s.⁴⁸ It opens: 'There are maps on the wall of Margaret Coyle's kitchen in her house in Totteridge, north London', referencing the material objects which accompany her biography. Margaret trained as a nurse and moved to London, and, despite discrimination at the height of the Northern Ireland conflict, 'explains why she can love Ireland and feel at home in England'.⁴⁹

Formal obituaries of Irish women are very rare, more frequently found under the heading of 'Other Lives', a series introduced in the *Guardian* because:

Obituaries pages traditionally describe and celebrate the lives of the great and good, the famous and infamous. There is another type of life that deserves noticing: people less in the public eye, or lives lived beyond formal recognition.⁵⁰

'Ordinary folk' who have made a public contribution through paid or voluntary work are recorded by family or friends, often with fierce commitment. For example:

Our mother, Bridget Moran who has died aged 95, had a life emblematic of the experiences of tens of thousands of poor Irish immigrants to Britain ...

Widowed in 1965, while still a mother with young children, she was committed to a life of hard work. At one time she held down three jobs simultaneously. She made huge sacrifices to see her children educated. She worked as a cleaner into her 80s and bitterly resented

retirement. She was tough, stoical and could be hard: one of her favourite phrases was, 'you've made your bed, now you must lie in it'.

She never abandoned the simple Catholic faith that she had learned as a child from the Sisters of Mercy; in her last days she recited the prayers she had been taught as a young girl. Throughout her life she possessed virtually nothing: she never owned a house or a car; her few sticks of furniture were worth coppers; and the contents of her wardrobe never cost more than a few pounds. But her legacy to her adopted country is rich: she gave it 70 years of hard work, and her children and six grandchildren are nurses, craftsmen, business people, scientists, television researchers, teachers and writers. We survive her, along with six of her siblings, and two great grandchildren.⁵¹

The extract from this 'other life' is reproduced in some detail because it encapsulates so eloquently many aspects of post-war migrant women's lives. The collective recording of Bridget's biography by her children notes intergenerational embeddedness in the Catholic religion of her own childhood and in the impact of her beliefs on the achievements of the second and third generations. It also connects an apparently 'ordinary' individual life with its profound economic, social and cultural consequences for her country of settlement.

Finally, representations of fictional characters draw on shared cultural knowledge of diasporic Irish women. They are included in novels, plays and films, adding 'authenticity' to 'English' situations.⁵² Again, these cannot be sampled systematically but appear frequently and apparently randomly. A recent example is *Grief*, a play by Mike Leigh described in *The Sunday Times* as 'An exquisitely observed, profoundly quiet slice of [English] 1950s suburban life.'⁵³ In the play there is a cameo part for a young Irish cleaner who arrives in an English middle-class home in the 1950s and briefly pours out her life history as an immigrant from Donegal, before storming out in protest about low pay. The subversive element is alluded to by reviewer Libby Purves who describes this as one of the 'repeated, unresisted humiliations [of the family]: the vigorous Irish cleaner losing patience with Dorothy'.⁵⁴

Linking real lives and fiction: secret stories

The different, but often interchangeable, genres in which Irish women's lives in the diaspora are represented may be brought together by a theme which illustrates powerfully ambiguities in the relationship between real life and fiction, that of secret stories. Paradoxically a very important aspect of personal lives is that which is missing and cannot be admitted in public accounts, and indeed Smart devotes a chapter to 'Secrets and Lies'. Usually these stories cannot remain hidden but surface in some form even after many years. Indeed, exposure has become more common in the present. Smart argues that uncovering family secrets has become a popular pastime, so that 'stories of illegitimacy, bigamy and even criminality seem to have become charming – as long as they occurred sufficiently long ago'.⁵⁵ The contemporary fascination with the search for old secrets is fuelled by the new availability of data on adoption and online historical data, providing sociological insights in terms of changing class, gender and generational relationships. Smart uses her own family history to very good effect in illustrating a range of ways in which 'illegitimate' aspects of women's lives were hidden from relatives who would have banished those who did not conform to the idealised picture of family life.⁵⁶

The issue of birth mothers who fled to England to escape the unbearable shame of single motherhood created by the Catholic Church, or could not return with their child, has particular resonance for Irish women.⁵⁷ Those who became pregnant outside marriage

were forcibly disconnected from their children, breaking the thread of embeddedness, which has been shown to be so powerful in mother/child relationships and in wider diasporic community formation. This has been and remains a particularly strong diasporic link to England. The specificity of such gendered connectedness between Ireland and England for Irish women is represented vividly by Marella Buckley:

large proportions of Irish women ‘complete’ their inner picture of the reproductive life choices available to them in Ireland by ‘supplementing’ them with the possible option of availing of British social services and climates. Thus most Irish women know that if they needed an abortion or a non-accusatory climate or childbirth or a relationship, one available option is to try to get to England to find it.⁵⁸

Part of the new trend towards revealing secrets is the discovery of Irish birth mothers by their ‘English’ children, often in adulthood. The secrecy surrounding this blood inheritance means that fictions may continue to be imagined and constructed from very limited knowledge. The ‘fact’ may be all that is available, in the absence of detailed records, leaving people to work out for themselves the meanings of such information. Is this also a cultural inheritance? Do Irish genes make you Irish? Is this a positive identity you want to embrace? Where does it place your adoptive parents and relatives in the family tree?

The importance of the trope is illustrated by its emergence across different genres of life stories. In the Irish 2 Project,⁵⁹ which used a social science methodology, out of 112 people interviewed in depth in 2001, one person with an Irish birth mother came forward in response to a local newspaper article in Banbury, Oxfordshire.⁶⁰ The article was headlined ‘How Irish Do You Think You Are?’ and invited people born in Britain to one or two Irish parents to share their experiences in recorded focus group discussions and/or qualitative interviews. Dick James⁶¹ contacted us and asked to be included in the project, although he knew very little about his mother:

The story goes she was a nurse in Birmingham and had a liaison with a Welsh man. You don’t in 1951, it is not even frowned upon, it is just not spoken about, so I was given up to Father Hudson orphanage.

He said he was not ready to search for his birth mother, both because his adoptive mother did not want this and because more generally he feared ‘it is only a can of worms that you could never put back’.

When I was given up to the orphanage for adoption I think she spent a couple more years in this country, married and went to Australia. She has a totally new family over there, and apparently she was Irish, born on the west side. If I had been part of that family I would be out-and-out Irish, no doubt about it. Now they are Australian Irish and the best of luck to them, she has at least one of each, but no, not until my parents are dead, and she is 80, would I contact her. It is not fair.

Although Dick’s Irish mother had only a small part in his life story, he felt strongly enough about his Irish blood inheritance to come forward to be interviewed.

Another second-generation Irish person chose to make her story public in later life by publishing her story as part of a regular series under the title ‘A letter to ...’ in the *Guardian* newspaper ‘Family’ section in December 2011. This contribution completed the generic heading with the words ‘My Irish birth mother’ and was signed ‘Your daughter, Teresa’, a self-chosen pseudonym.⁶² The letter began:

Almost sixty years ago you fled to England, eight months pregnant and desperate. I do understand that you could never have told your parents about me. Many years later I learned that the family had more than the usual Irish share of priests and nuns, and that your mother would have died of shame if you had turned up with an illegitimate child.

So I was born in England, adopted by an English family, educated in England, employed in England, married in England [...] and now I am a pensioner in England with English children and grandchildren of my own.

The letter goes on to express regret that her mother had not been able to remain in Ireland so that Teresa could grow up

in what I often feel is my proper place, among people I feel are my people. The problem is I have always felt displaced. At times throughout my life, I have felt a painful sense of exile from a beloved home country.

But she remembers that her mother too was exiled and never returned to live in Ireland. She does not blame her for what she did: 'I do know that you did what you could at a terrible cruel time. You did your best.'

I corresponded with the 'Family' section production editor, Clare Flowers, who confirmed that this was a letter actually received from a reader, not a fiction invented by the newspaper, and was indeed unedited. She explained the rationale for the column and how this letter fitted into the genre:

Each week's Letter tells a story. It is chosen because I think the story will resonate with readers in a positive way – ie, engage them, amuse them, touch them and/or relate to their own life experience. The Letter must also relate in some way to family dynamics or relationships, experiences, memories. We receive a large number and can only print a small selection. With Teresa's, the subject matter was unusual and therefore interesting. I felt she vividly expressed herself in an engaging way. I wasn't thinking about other people who might have had a similar experience but in our multicultural society there must be many readers who might feel something similar.⁶³

Teresa's story is central to Irish women's experiences in the 1950s and 1960s, either directly as an immediate cause of emigration, indirectly through events in the lives of family and friends or through the 'imaginary' of pervasive warnings about transgression. It is thus intimately known to Irish women in sharp contrast to an English context where the situation is 'unusual and therefore interesting'. I wanted to know whether the editor herself recognised this experience as being part of 'mainstream' cultural understanding about diasporic Irish women in English society. She responded:

I can't really comment on this experience being part of English culture as I'm not English myself, although I am British. I do know that many Irish women came to Britain in times past to give birth and also about the 'steamies' [Glasgow tenement wash houses].

There is an interesting ambiguity here about the 'commonplaceness' of Irish women's experiences which is well known in British society and the 'unusualness' of this letter.

Many named examples of the search for Irish birth mothers are emerging in the press. Some are of well-known figures, including the politician Clare Short, a second-generation Irish woman who gave up her son for adoption in the 1960s.⁶⁴ The story became public in 1996 when Short was MP for Birmingham Ladywood and a member of the shadow cabinet. She explained:

I found out I was pregnant just after my 18th birthday. My first thought was my parents – you know I come from a Catholic family. It was different times back then. Everyone was more innocent.

A student in Birmingham at the time, she married the child's father and then contacted an adoption agency.

Labour officials explained that 50-year-old Ms Short, descendant of staunch Irish republicans from Crossmaglen, had acted as a Catholic teenager would easily have done in the early 1960s [...] Since that time, Clare has lived with a sense of pain and loss at the centre of her life.

Another high-profile case was Philomena Lee whose son, Michael Hess, was taken to the USA from Ireland and became chief legal counsel to President George Bush Senior.⁶⁵ Jeremy Harding, the author and journalist, gives a much fuller account of his own search, having learned from his adoptive parents that he was the son of a Scandinavian sailor and ‘a little Irish girl’. His memoir, with the revealing name *Mother Country*, is a detailed and beautifully written account of his long and difficult search for Margaret, his birth mother, in his middle age. He eventually finds her in a council flat in West London, the area where he had been born. The book was given lengthy, appreciative reviews in ‘quality’ newspapers.⁶⁶

A final move to foregrounding the fictional approach to the representation of real lives is the novel by Jon McGregor published in 2006 entitled *So Many Ways to Begin*, which replicates and amplifies many aspects of the unfolding account in the ‘A Letter to . . . My Irish birth mother’. The book opens with a cameo, formatted in italics to indicate its separation from the main narrative and perhaps its ‘story within a story’ status. It is a brief biography of Mary Friel, a war-time immigrant to London who gives up her child for adoption, then returns to Ireland. The book then starts again conventionally, introducing the protagonist David Carter, an English boy, then young man, living in Coventry, who becomes a museum curator. The narrative details mundane aspects of his life as a collector of everyday small objects.

In his early twenties David discovers that he was adopted and that his birth mother was Irish. Eventually he goes to Ireland to meet a woman he believes might be his mother, but it turns out that the Mary he meets is one of the many other women who had to give up their half-Irish children for adoption. Just as Teresa never managed to meet her own birth mother and can only write her an anonymous letter in the newspaper, so David never finds his own mother, only a similarly aged woman with the same first name.

Interestingly, just as the *Guardian* editor knew that ‘many Irish women’ had this experience in the past, reviewers of *So Many Ways to Begin* all agreed that this was a novel about very commonplace things, one presumably being Irish birth mothers. *The Observer*, under the title ‘The Wind Cries Mary’, reported:

With his second novel, *So Many Ways to Begin*, Jon McGregor proves once again that the unremarkable can be a story worth telling, says Stephanie Merritt.

Where does a life, a family, a sense of belonging and identity begin? McGregor starts with Mary, a teenage girl leaving her home in Donegal for the first time to enter domestic service in London during the Second World War. What follows is a commonplace story. She catches the eye of the master of the house, becomes pregnant, leaves her baby at the hospital and returns home, guarding her secret through the years. All this takes place in a brief prologue; Mary dies not appear again, but her shadow falls across the rest of the narrative.⁶⁷

I wrote to the author, Jon McGregor, asking why he had chosen this Irish material and where he thought his ideas had come from. He gave a long, very thoughtful reply reflecting on the Irish influences on his – English – life. These included an Irish friend at university with whom he had visited Donegal for holidays; Jon’s knowledge came from ‘conversations with my friend’s father or from the books he lent me’. He also knew from personal experience about the ‘Irishness’ of Coventry, where the story was set, and finally reflected on his generalised understandings of Irish immigration to Britain. He said: ‘I already knew *almost instinctively* that cases of Irish girls giving up children for adoption in England in the 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s were fairly common.’⁶⁸

Like the *Guardian* editor, McGregor also felt reluctant to describe himself as English. In response to my question ‘Would you say that you are an “English” writer? Is this at all relevant?’ he wrote:

I really don't know. Yes, in the sense that although I have Scottish ancestry (a paternal grandmother from Dumfries, and a paternal grandfather who was third generation Scots) and was born in Bermuda, I've grown up in England; albeit an England full of people arriving from elsewhere, or leaving, or hankering after a life they've left behind, an England which keeps changing as it always has done.

But he also said that he felt uneasy with the metropolitan and middle-class connotations of 'English writer':

I feel quite estranged from the context I would associate with the term 'English writer'; North London based novelists who went to Oxford or Cambridge, who write novels about squash-playing academics and journalists and doctors who take holidays in Suffolk and Tuscany and who struggle with the emotional challenge of wanting to have affairs with younger women but feel that perhaps they shouldn't.

The theme of Irish birth mothers parted from their children resonates strongly within the 'diaspora space' of England, linking migrants, their descendants and the wider society of which they become part. It both hybridises and confuses cultural inheritances and places Irish women's bodies very clearly in the public space, even though their names and photographs are usually absent.

Conclusions

Life stories cannot be representative of all Irish women in the diaspora.⁶⁹ However carefully samples are selected to give an identifiable spread, the relatively small numbers involved will always limit the variety of dimensions which could be included – such as social class, ethnicity, places of origin, places of settlement, generation, age, sexual orientation, ability/disability, political allegiance, national identity, settled/Traveller. Some samples are necessarily opportunistic owing to the difficulty of locating participants,⁷⁰ or intentionally focused on women with similar backgrounds.⁷¹ In contrast to the planned work of academics, the serendipity of public accounts appearing in print means that the picture must be impressionistic and incomplete rather than 'photographically' accurate. Moreover, the uniqueness of each individual story remains, as Avtar Brah points out:

While personal identities always articulate with the collective experience of a group, the specificity of a person's life experience etched in the daily minutiae of live social relations produces trajectories that do not simply mirror group experience.⁷²

Instead, the strength of using life stories to explore the experiences of Irish women in the diaspora lies in the detailed insights offered about the processes of migration and diasporic settlement and their meanings both for women themselves and the wider communities of which they are part. Moreover, their presentation in a rich variety of forms, including direct responses to questions, self-directed biographic accounts, indirect narratives by family and others, written works of fiction⁷³ and the visual arts, including photography, film, painting,⁷⁴ collage⁷⁵ and tapestry,⁷⁶ makes them accessible to very wide audiences.

Most importantly, the publication of narratives of personal life which began with *Across the Water* has allowed the central roles of Irish women in the diaspora to be acknowledged. Diaspora is a concept which is underpinned by notions of connectedness across and within nations, communities and families. Smart's five concepts allow us to recognise key processes by which individual lives create and build on these connections. Particularly valuable is the multigenerational spread with its accompanying hybridities. Not least of these involve intersections in 'diaspora space' with other ethnic groups,

both mainstream and minority, illustrated here by exploring the personal responses of ‘English’ – or ‘British’ – people who include diasporic Irish women in their academic, journalistic and creative writing.

‘Fact’ and ‘fiction’ clearly overlap and intermingle. Apparently ‘true’ stories of personal and family memory are constructed in the present for particular purposes, to make sense of and celebrate significant lives. Where important details are missing – misremembered, forgotten, hidden, destroyed – they are provisionally restored from generic knowledges or painstakingly researched for ‘hard’ clues. Narratives labelled ‘fiction’ draw on personal and collective experiences which offer authenticity and provide connections to shared cultural understandings.

Notes

1. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America* (1983). Other examples include Pauline Jackson, ‘Women in Nineteenth Century Irish Emigration’ (1984); Lynn H. Lees, *Exiles of Erin* (1979); and Robert E. Kennedy, *The Irish* (1973).
2. *Irish Women: Our Experience of Emigration* (1984).
3. O’Carroll, *Models for Movers*.
4. Conway, *The Faraway Hills are Green*.
5. Oral histories of Irish women in the USA were used by Janet Nolan in *Ourselves Alone* (1989) to supplement an account which drew primarily on ‘raw numerical data gathered from Irish and American census and emigration reports, as well as ... the more literary evidence found in emigrant letters and oral histories’, arguing that ‘like the proverbial picture, numbers speak more loudly than words’ (7). She used examples from the Connecticut Oral History Project (Irish Interviews, 1–26 May 1975, Center for Oral History, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT).
6. For example, in the path-breaking work of Thomas and Znaniecki whose *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* was first published in 1918–21, and in C. Wright Mills’s classic study *The Sociological Imagination* (1959).
7. Harrison, ‘Editor’s Introduction: Researching Lives’, xxiv.
8. Lambert, *Irish Women in Lancashire*.
9. Ryan, ‘I’m Going to England’.
10. Ryan, ‘Moving Spaces’, 69–70.
11. Lennon, McAdam, and O’Brien, Introduction to *Across the Water*.
12. *Ibid.*, 9.
13. Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 393.
14. Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora*, 15.
15. Ryan, ‘I’m Going to England’, 42.
16. Harte, “‘Somewhere beyond England and Ireland’”, 293.
17. Walter, *Outsiders Inside*, 27.
18. Lambert, *Irish Women in Lancashire*, ix.
19. Olsen and Shopes, ‘Crossing Boundaries’.
20. Lambert, *Irish Women in Lancashire*, 7.
21. *Ibid.*, 8.
22. Lennon, McAdam, and O’Brien, *Across the Water*, 11, emphasis added.
23. Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, 4.
24. Lennon, McAdam, and O’Brien, *Across the Water*, 14.
25. See Bourdieu, *Photography*, for a discussion of the social functions of family photography.
26. Gilsenan, Roberts, and Walsh, *The Irish Empire*.
27. A parallel may be drawn here between the placing of the volume in the middle of the series and the location of *Irish Women and Irish Migration* (1995) in the middle of Patrick O’Sullivan’s ‘The Irish Worldwide’ series of printed volumes, signifying its acceptance as a legitimate field of representation (McWilliams, *Women and Exile*). This contrasts with the furore about, and very belated inclusion of, a volume of women’s writing in the *Field Day* collection (Bourke et al.).

28. As academic adviser, I had suggested key themes for the programme. In her proposed 'treatment' the director Dearbhla Walsh decided 'to tell the untold stories of the female experience of emigration and place these in their social, economic and historical contexts' (unpublished research document, 27 July 1998).
29. Smart, *Personal Life*, 17–26.
30. The thesis is expounded by Giddens, *Transformation of Intimacy*; Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*; and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*; see Ray, *Individualisation and the Third Age*.
31. Smart, *Personal Life*, 1.
32. *Ibid.*, 3.
33. *Ibid.*, 45.
34. Gray, "'Too Close for Comfort'", 45.
35. *Ibid.*, original emphasis.
36. Smart, *Personal Lives*, 37.
37. Harte, *The Literature of the Irish in Britain*, xvi.
38. Morrison, *Things My Mother Never Told Me*.
39. Harte, "'Somewhere beyond England and Ireland'", 293.
40. Morrison, *Things My Mother Never Told Me*, 12.
41. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julie_Walters (accessed 14 June 2012); 'Brit Actress and Comedienne', <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0910278/> (accessed 14 June 2012).
42. Walters, *That's Another Story*.
43. The General Household Survey 1974–1996/97 showed that 76.4% of the second generation in England and Wales had one non-Irish-born parent. Hickman, Morgan, and Walter, *Second-generation Irish People*, 14.
44. Described on Wikipedia as 'an English novelist, short story writer and critic'. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilary_Mantel (accessed 21 July 2012).
45. Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost*, 36.
46. *Ibid.*, 152.
47. <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/hilary-mantel> (accessed 21 July 2012).
48. 'Tales of Belonging', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/apr/07/britishidentity.immigration> (accessed 21 July 2012).
49. *Guardian*, 7 April 2008.
50. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/series/otherlives> (accessed 15 June 2012).
51. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2010/jul/04/bridget-moran-obituary> (accessed 21 July 2012). Another example is Sheila Finch, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/sep/22/tradeunions> (accessed 18 August 2012).
52. Walter, 'Including the Irish'.
53. Szalwinska, *The Sunday Times*, 24 September 2011.
54. Purves, Review of *Grief*, 13.
55. Smart, *Personal Life*, 108.
56. *Ibid.*, 112–20.
57. See detailed analysis of the issue of PFIs (Pregnant from Ireland) by Garrett, *Social Work and Irish People in Britain*, 21–51.
58. Buckley, 'Sitting on your Politics', 122.
59. The Irish 2 Project, 'The Second-generation Irish: A Hidden Population in Multi-ethnic Britain', was funded by an ESRC grant (R000238367), and directed by Professor Bronwen Walter. Co-researchers were Professor Mary J. Hickman, Dr Joseph Bradley, and Dr Sarah Morgan. Fieldwork locations were Banbury, Coventry, London and Manchester in England, and Strathclyde in Scotland.
60. *Banbury Citizen*, 1 December 2000, 1.
61. The man in question was given a pseudonym which reflected his 'English-sounding' name from his adoptive parents.
62. *Guardian*, 'Family' section, 31 December 2011, 7.
63. Clare Flowers, personal communication, 2 March 2011.
64. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/1996/oct/17/labour.uk> (accessed 21 July 2012).
65. Sixsmith, 'No More Guilty Secret'.
66. Kellaway, 'Loyal Hunt of the Son'; Cooke, 'Mummies Dearest'; Palmer, Review of *Mother Country*.

67. Merritt, 'The Wind Cries Mary'.
68. McGregor, personal communication, 18 August 2008, emphasis added.
69. Lambert, *Irish Women in Lancashire*, 4–6.
70. See, for example, Ryan, 'Moving Spaces and Changing Places', 69:

Most of the 11 women had initially become involved in the study through an advertisement in the *Irish Post*. Thus they were largely self-selected and, although they represent a range of experiences and backgrounds, I cannot claim that they accurately reflect the diversity of all Irish women migrants.

71. For example, Ryan, *Migrant Women, Social Networks and Motherhood*, 300:

I recruited the [25] participants through advertisements in Irish newspapers in Britain, the *Irish Post* and *Irish World*, through Irish organizations such as the Federation of Irish societies and snow balling. I sought older participants who had migrated as single, childless women and who subsequently became mothers in Britain.

72. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 124.
73. There are many more examples, of course, of characters in novels who emigrated from Ireland because they were pregnant outside marriage, a number of which are discussed by Ellen McWilliams in chapter 1 of *Women and Exile* (2013).
74. For example, Rachael Flynn, 'Points of Departure'.
75. For example, Sarah Strong, The *Rian* Art Project.
76. For example, Lambkin and Meegan, 'The Fabric of Memory'.

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