Abstract
This article discusses issues of migration, history, memory and Irish society as they relate to a project based on life narratives at the Irish Centre for Migration Studies, University College Cork. The project, entitled *Breaking the Silence – staying ‘at home’ in an emigrant society* digitally recorded the life narratives of Irish women and men who stayed in Ireland in the mid-twentieth century and used new technologies to publish those with appropriate copyright in Real Audio format on the Internet. These life narratives offer important insights into how the experience of emigration in Ireland during the 1950s has been incorporated into the rapid social change of the latter half of the twentieth century. Initial themes emerging from analysis of six narratives are discussed in this article.
Introduction

Over 400,000 people emigrated from the Republic of Ireland in the 1950s, about two-thirds of these going to Britain. This out-migration undermined strongly held national ideals of the Irish family. It also reinforced a social structure that preserved the interests of ‘the possessing classes’ (secure farming, business, bureaucratic and professional classes) (Lee, 1989, p. 374). Questions of who stayed and who left, therefore, need to be considered in relation to the structure of Irish society and debates about its nature and culture at the time. Staying and going were publicly constructed and accounted for via wider discourses of Irish national belonging. The ideology of the reluctant exile based on the idea that emigration was a legacy of colonialism offered one means of rationalising the exodus (Miller 1985, 1990). Historian, Miller suggests that the idea of emigration as ‘exile’ or ‘political banishment’ enabled the maintenance of national stability and a Catholic bourgeois hegemony (Miller, 1990, p. 90). The rise of individualism was covered up by an appeal to legacies of colonialism, thereby avoiding class and familial conflicts. Both emigrants and those who profited from their departure were absolved of responsibility. Further, the ideology of an Irish people who were not materialistic and who valued community over individualism identified emigration with ‘un-Irish’ materialistic aspirations. This postcolonial ideology of the non-materialistic Irish ‘national character’ positioned emigrants as setting their sights beyond a ‘naturally’ Irish frugal way of life. From this perspective, those leaving were seen as having high material expectations and leaving because of their own ambitions rather than out of necessity (Lee 1989).

But not all discourses constituted emigration in relation to a postcolonial underdevelopment or individualistic motivations. For example, reference to
emigration during election campaigns and in response to the Reports of the 
*Commission on Emigration and other Populations Problems* during the 1950s represented it as an indicator of national failure (Akenson, 2000, p. 22). Also, some media and Catholic Church commentary identified emigration as a potential threat to the moral welfare of women emigrants in particular. However, discourses of emigration as exile, individualistic aspiration, a sign of national failure, or gendered moral threat, elided the dynamics between staying and going and, when accepted as ‘common sense’, prevented sustained social analysis of emigration. Indeed, it is possible to argue that through excessive invocation of the idea of emigration, a form of ‘hypostatisation’ took place. This is less a refusal to continue speaking of the phenomenon of emigration than a refusal to continue interpreting it (Antze, 1996, p. xix). As Jackson argues, it became ‘part of the culture’ (Jackson, 1963, p. 30).

A project based on life narratives at the Irish Centre for Migration Studies, at the National University of Ireland, Cork was launched in February 2000. This project entitled *Breaking the Silence – staying ‘at home’ in an emigrant society* was part-funded by the Higher Education Authority Ireland and aimed to capture the textures of everyday life in Ireland in the 1950s from the perspectives of those who stayed. The life narratives of Irish women and men who stayed were digitally recorded and those with appropriate copyright were published in Real Audio format on the Internet. Life stories have the advantage of locating the ‘process’ of staying in Ireland within individual lives across time and in a context of wider social networks. The social world provides individuals with the resources to understand who they are individually (Halbwachs, 1992), but the subjective aspect of individual testimonies emphasises the variety of experiences and interpretations of this social world. Because the life
narratives cover life spans up to the present, they offer insights into how the experience of emigration and staying in Ireland has been incorporated into the rapid social change of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Although, the Breaking the Silence project was also set up in Northern Ireland in conjunction with the Centre for Migration Studies at Omagh and Queens University Belfast and with the Traveller community in collaboration with the Pavee Point Traveller Cultural Centre, Dublin, the focus of this article is the context of the settled population in the Republic of Ireland. It begins by considering the ways in which 1950s emigration has been framed by historical and sociological accounts of twentieth century Ireland. Then the complex and changing relationships between history and memory are investigated and their implications for the Breaking the Silence project are discussed. The rationale for and methodological considerations involved in this project are briefly considered before concluding with a discussion of some of the emerging themes.

Emigration and 1950s Ireland

‘The Fifties’, Fallon asserts, ‘were in every way a watershed, in which an entire epoch ended and the modern one emerged’ (Fallon. 1998, p. 257). The modernisation of farming led to a decline of about one quarter in the total size of the agricultural labour force in this decade, while other productive resources remained underdeveloped. The stem family system, whereby the farm was inherited by one son (it was rare for a daughter to inherit), prevented subdivision of farms. However, these holdings were, in the main, very small (24% of holdings were of 5 acres only) and could barely provide for one family (Jackson, 1963). Uncertainty about which son would inherit the farm and the relatively late age of inheritance made it difficult for young people in a predominantly rural economy to plan ahead. Irish marriage rates were low in this
decade with many postponing or avoiding marriage in order to maintain some material standard of living (Ryan, 1955). Following abortive attempts at economic modernisation in the 1940s, the 1950s ended with a shift in government policy towards a more open and industrialised economy. The particular nexus of discourses of emigration, modernisation and tradition in this decade make it a pivotal period for the tracking and analysis of social change in Ireland in the twentieth century.

The establishment by the government of the twenty-four member Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems in 1948 could be seen as indicating that a need for analysis of this persistent phenomenon had been identified. However, it is important to locate the establishment of the Commission in a wider context. Its terms of reference and remit resembled closely that of the 1944 British Royal Commission on Population, which arose out of ‘population panic’ in Britain as a result of the aging population and declining birth-rate (Thane, 1999). This panic about population was framed by some in terms of ‘national suicide’ and is similar to the panic in the Irish diaspora about population decline in Ireland. For example, US based (keep Fr. John A.) O’Brien’s edited collection of essays entitled The Vanishing Irish (O’Brien, 1954) attacked the assumptions of the Irish establishment which were seen as producing sexual repression, damaging family life and forcing young Irish people to leave the country (Garvin, 1998, p. 149).

The Reports of the Irish Commission offer some insights into the relationships between the structure of Irish society and emigration at the time. Based on extensive surveys and statistical analyses, the main report noted the predominance of economic issues in emigration decisions, but also identified poverty, restricted freedom, the
monotony of rural life and the attractions of urban life as significant factors. Ryan, commenting at the time, argued that it would have been difficult for the Commission to pass judgement one way or another on emigration because it had positive material consequences (Ryan, 1955). The Reports received considerable newspaper coverage and government departments prepared memoranda on the implications of the Commission’s findings for their departments (Delaney, 2000, p. 197).

Although all of the government departments considered the implications for their areas of responsibility, no substantive recommendation was followed and its findings descended into obscurity (Delaney, 2000, p. 200). The proposal to establish emigrant advice centres was largely ignored and many of the papers of the Commission have since been lost (Travers, 1995, p. 163). Although the Reports point to the complexities of the relationships between emigration and the structure of Irish society at the time, they tell us little about the negotiations that preceded emigration, the private and public processes by which one stayed and another left, and the ways in which emigration affected the subsequent lives of those who stayed, their family lives and their local communities. The Breaking the Silence project captures the textures of these experiences.

Another site of debate on emigration in the 1950s was the Emigration Section of the Catholic Social Welfare Bureau which was set up by the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid in 1942 to care for emigrants, especially women and girls and to ensure their continued adherence to the Catholic faith (Kelly & Nic Giolla Choille 1995, p. 169). Its annual report in 1956 stated: ‘[a]s in other recent years register office marriages, laxity in attendance of religious duties and, in the case of young
As noted earlier, some historical analyses identify those who remained in Ireland as privileged, benefiting from the ‘safety valve’ of emigration, consequent social stability and the preservation of conservative values ‘at home’. The Commission on Emigration acknowledged the circulation of an apparently contrary discourse based on the idea that ‘emigration deprives the country of the best of its people’ (Report, 1954, p. 139). The report refuted this view by arguing that it arose because young people were leaving and that this demographic profile of emigration produced an unfavourable social and economic environment at home. Although the Reports of the Commission attempted to challenge notions of selective emigration that identified those leaving as ‘the best’, some academic (mainly historical) accounts reveal implicit and explicit assumptions about those who stayed and those who left.

Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid commissioned a survey of attitudes in Dublin to religion and clerical authority in 1962. This survey noted that Ireland was deprived of intellectual energy because it had forced ‘young people of energy and mental independence to find a living in other countries’ (Garvin, 2000, p. 197). Foster, argues that the outflow enabled archaic patterns of Irish rural life to continue and ‘created a particular social composition among the people who stayed’ (Foster, 1988, p. 345). Given the high levels of young Irish people leaving in every generation,
Foster suggests that those who were ‘left behind’ could be seen as ‘a residual population’ (1988, p. 371). Although his analysis seems to rely on the age distribution of those who left, his counterfactual question: ‘What would have happened if the most energetic and alienated elements of society, with the least to lose, had stayed at home instead of leaving?’ identifies those who stayed as the less energised and less alienated element of Irish society (Foster, 1993, p. 91).

Another historian, Lyons, also emphasises the selective operation of emigration with ‘the young and the vigorous’ leaving behind ‘those less well fitted to make their way in the world’ (Lyons, 1963, p. 665). This interpretation is reproduced and recorded in the ‘historical’ record, but is also evident as part of popular memory in the accounts of those taking part in the Breaking the Silence project. Such characterisations valorise movement/migration as a practice and locate it within a discourse of progress and modernity while staying is constituted as stasis and reproducing ‘more of the same’. This construction of emigrants and the effects of emigration contrasts with discourses of forced exile which identified emigrants as victims of colonial underdevelopment. Although it has more in common with the discourse of emigration as individual ambition and materialism, it celebrates enterprise which is located outside the country and identifies the space/place of Ireland itself with inertia. We are left with questions about the effects of these contradictory discourses (at the time and since) and the kinds of ‘staying subjects’ they produced.

In the sociological literature, the decade of the 1950s is represented almost exclusively within a narrative of national modernisation that often overlooks emigration (for an exception, see Jackson, 1963). The following two quotes from
sociologist, Fahey, outline the parameters of this narrative of Ireland’s ‘development’ and ‘progress’ since the mid-twentieth century.

A half-century ago, as the worldwide population boom was seriously taking off, Ireland seemed stricken by an inability to keep up, much less increase, its population numbers. Crippling waves of emigration and an extraordinary reluctance among Irish people to marry and form families had given Ireland's population trends a pathological quality, the only country in modern times to have sustained more than 100 years of population decline. As a balance sheet of national performance, the census of population in 1961 was a dismal document, as it showed that Ireland's demographic malaise had deepened rather than eased during what for most other countries were the golden years of the 1950s (1998, p. 51).

Demographic and social change in Ireland since the 1960s tell a story of a nation breaking away from its past. In the political arena, much of that story has been read as unambiguously positive - it is a past of stagnation and decline, epitomised by the demographic contractions of the 1950s, which is being abandoned and which has been supplanted by vigour and growth in the 1990s. Ireland's population is young and growing, and for the first time since the Famine, it seems possible that all those young people who want to stay in Ireland will have jobs and earnings prospects to enable them to do so. The major political parties are at one in their welcome for these developments and even in the broad outlines of the strategies needed to promote them further in the future (Ibid).

Fahey reflects on the fact that this sociological ‘story’ of national modernisation is read as ‘unambiguously positive’ and notes the strong desire to abandon the 1950s, a decade closely associated with emigration and decline, to ‘the past’. Instead, the counter-posing of inertia prior to 1958 with a progressive narrative of modernisation since then leaves most of the 1950s under-examined. It also fails to acknowledge those elements of Irish life associated with the 1950s that have marked every decade since then. Irish society and identity are constituted in sociological accounts in relation to the ‘relentless forward movement of developmental historicism that constitutes the alternative as passé’ (Lloyd, 1999, p. 98). This new and critical phase of developmental forward movement is seen as beginning in 1958, with the publication of Economic Development by Whitaker, then secretary of the Department of Finance.
(and followed by the first *Programme for Economic Expansion*) (see Breen, 1990; Clancy, 1995; Kennedy, 1986; Litton, 1982; Peillon, 1982). The introductory section of *Economic Development* includes the comment that ‘[t]he common talk among people in the towns, as in rural Ireland, is of their children having to emigrate as soon as their education is competed in order to be sure of a reasonable livelihood’ (quoted in Delaney, 2000, p. 227). Economic modernisation is legitimated here by family experiences of emigration and public evidence of population depletion in the 1956 Census. Yet, in many sociological accounts, emigration and its impact on the subsequent ‘development’ of the country is relegated to ‘the past’, something to be transcended rather than incorporated in analyses of Irish society.

Whitaker’s economic programme marked a shift away from ideologies of a self-sufficient economy towards initiatives to attract foreign capital investment in export oriented manufacturing and the development of an agriculture industry integrated into the European market. The stemming of emigration was to be the acid test that identified the success or failure of this new government policy (See the *Irish Times* 12 Nov. 1958). In the sociological narrative presented earlier, the decades since the 1950s fall into a modernising present characterised by a young population who might want to stay in the country rather than emigrate. Unlike the ‘residual population’ who put up with ‘stagnation and decline’ ‘at home’ in the 1950s, the ‘vigour and growth’ of 1990s Ireland identifies those who stayed in that decadeterms of vitality and progress rather than stasis.

Although high levels of emigration returned in the 1980s, this ‘new wave’ of emigration included more middle-class and highly educated emigrants and was
appropriated into national narratives of global modernisation. It was characterised in political and media rhetoric largely in terms of opportunity, globalised career structures and ‘skilling-up’ abroad in order to contribute more productively to Ireland’s economic development on return. Although, a significant proportion of this generation emigrated with low levels of education and few prospects, and the image of the successful mobile Irish migrant was contested (see Kelly & Nic Giolla Choille 1995; Mac Laughlin 1994; Nic Giolla Choille 1989), this discourse dominated government and media representations of 1980s emigration. As the dominant class composition of migrants changed so too did the meaning of migration. Instead of exile, national failure or ‘unIrish’ individualism, it became a mode of self and national advancement in the global marketplace.

Further cultural and ethical shifts took place in the 1990s, which heralded President Robinson’s introduction of the term ‘the Irish diaspora’⁵ to describe the multiple generations identifying as Irish outside of Ireland and, to some extent those resident in Ireland itself. The invocation of the diaspora was part of a shift to more pluralist discourses of Irishness as a means of opening up the possibilities of belonging and identification in Northern Ireland (see Kearney 1988; Gray, in press). This decade also saw emigration being revisited in Famine commemorations in Ireland, the US, Canada and elsewhere. Emigration was refigured in the 1990s through a discourse of diaspora, remembrance and commemoration. This shift undermined the active capacity to remember as ‘Famine’ and ‘emigration’ were located in an undifferentiated past and became largely mediated rather than ‘lived’ memories.
Although the country began to experience return migration alongside high levels of in-migration in the late 1990s (Mac Éinrí, 2001), the term diaspora, was identified with the dispersal of ‘Irish’ people over many generations, but not with the dispersals of incoming migrants from other parts of the world. The memory of migration, even of the most recent wave in the 1980s, is increasingly seen as ‘an encumbrance’ in the rush of the Celtic Tigers and their cubs to fully occupy the position of ‘global nomads’. Memories of the 1950s, the decade that witnessed the highest levels of emigration in twentieth century Ireland seem even more remote and irrelevant to contemporary economic, political and social concerns.

There is no doubt that emigration has deeply marked the development of Irish society in the twentieth century in ways that continue to go under analysed. By inviting people to remember emigration from the perspective of staying, the Breaking the Silence project set out to reveal some of the ways in which complacency and consent for mass emigration were arrived at and to re-historicise the diaspora from one of its many sites – the homeland. The project is addressed meta questions such as: What national ‘traditions’ were invented in order to normalise the phenomenon of emigration? How were the contradictions between nationalist discourses of nation-state building based on the ‘traditional Irish family’ and the dispersal of these families resolved – by individuals, families and local communities? With what effects? How were emigration and staying negotiated? What marked the differences between staying and going then? And now? The most exciting aspect of a project such as this one, and perhaps its greatest potential, is that it is impossible to anticipate the ‘new’ questions that these life narratives will pose.
**Questions of memory and history in a life narrative project**

Any project that sets out to make sense of past phenomena is implicated in questions of the relationships between past and present, history and memory as well as the construction of meaning and representation. The memories being collected by the *Breaking the Silence* project cannot be assumed to correspond with some actual past, but a past that is constructed through subsequent experience and present concerns. The separation between past and present is undone if we see the past as constituted in the context of the present. As Jenkins reminds us ‘there never has been, and … there never will be, any such thing as a past which is expressive of some sort of essence’ (Jenkins, 1995, p. 9). The past is always understood ‘from the standpoint of the present, so that its meaning is constantly in flux, always open to new acts of deciphering’ (Felski, 2000, p. 13). Even though all memory is dependent on some past experience or event, the temporal status of memory is always the present (Huyssen, 1995, p. 3). History and memory texts are, therefore, influenced by the social contexts out of which they emerge and are interpretive events that are always open to re-interpretation.

Ranke’s view of history as a rigorous science that uses only primary sources and demonstrates how things actually happened has been challenged in recent decades by the recognition of the role of narrative and metaphor in the writing of history (Iggers, 1997). Indeed, many have come to question whether history can reference a reality outside of its narrative texts (see White, 1980). Alun Munslow defines history as ‘the creation and eventual imposition by historians of a particular narrative form on the past’ because history cannot exist until it becomes available to the reader in its obligatory narrative form (1997, p. 2). In some languages, such as French, the word
for ‘history’ also means ‘story’, emphasising the narrative aspect of history (O’Meally & Fabre, 1994). However, it is important not to relativise all narratives attributing no more or less authority to each one. Events do take place and contemporaneous records and accounts provide important insights that might only be available to some individuals at the time. The memories that make up the *Breaking the Silence* project life narratives can be cross-referenced with documentation, historical, media and other contemporaneous sources of evidence. Having said that the purpose of the project was less about re-presenting the 1950s ‘as it was’, than opening up new avenues of interpretation. While, it is important that these interpretations are plausible and sustainable based on available evidence, interpretations and analyses of these life narratives will also reveal the ways in which the past is part of our present by revealing the work done by ‘the Fifties’ in current self-and collective-representations.

Memories and life stories make a claim on the past: ‘This is how it happened, they say’ (White, 1998, p. 17). Richard White points to the dangers of viewing memories as history, but notes that the *dynamic between* history and memory is most productive. He points to the particular contribution of memory when he suggests that ‘there are regions of the past that only memory knows’ (1998, p. 4). French theorist Nora (1994) distinguishes between history as an abstract and intellectual activity and memory as related to feeling and affect. He argues that we create *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, ‘because there are no longer milieus de mémoire, real environments of memory’ (1994, p. 284). These are ‘moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned…’ (Nora, 1994, p. 289).
What we now call memory, Nora argues, is already history. True memory, for Nora, is spontaneous and embodied in gestures, habits, skills, unspoken transmissions and ingrained reflexes. Lieux de mémoire emerge at a time when ‘an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears’ (Nora, 1994, p. 288). Peasant culture, which Nora sees as a repository of collective memory, is undermined by mass culture and industrialisation and displaced by ‘the appearance of the trace, of mediation, of distance, we are not in the realm of true memory but of history’ (1994, p. 285). In contrast with many other contemporary theorists of memory (see Huyssen, 1995), Nora argues that history has replaced memory. However, like White, he is interested in the tense interactions between history and memory which in a context of rapid social change create _lieux de mémoire_ in a conscious effort to limit forgetfulness.

History and memory, according to White, do not follow the same rules. Therefore, in the collaboration between them, history often cruelly recovers ‘what memory seeks to bury or disguise’ (White, 1998, p. 5). History, White suggests, ‘threatens our versions of ourselves’ (White, 1998, p. 18). This is because history can also be distinguished from memory by the historian’s attempts ‘to reconstruct a past which the individual, or the society, cannot have known’ (Boyce, 2001, p. 259). Although history can cruelly prove a memory incorrect, this does not undermine the significance of memory. Memories, as White himself argues, ‘are the stuff from which we fashion our lives and our stories. History can interrogate these stories; it can complicate them, but it cannot kill them’ (1998, p. 6).

History and memory then can be seen as two different modes of accounting for the past both of which are being refigured as a result of the contemporary crisis in
ideologies of progress and modernisation and the effects of globalisation and heritagisation (Samuel, 1994; Huyssen, 1995; Gilroy, 2000). The distinction between history and memory is refigured by contemporary questions about modernity and progress. Teleological notions of history are currently being undermined by an obsession with memory, which is seen as an alternative to the legitimating narratives of history (Huyssen, 1995). Instead of replacing history with memory, or posing one against the other, perhaps it is more important to consider the changing distinctions between these and the implications of these changes for understanding the social world.

With the advent of the Celtic Tiger and the celebration of a modern globalised Irishness, the problematic periodisation of ‘tradition’ in the past (the 1950s) and ‘modernity’ in subsequent decades is destabilised by the ever shortening of horizons between past and present. Short-term horizons frame contemporary debate in the public sphere and produce an identity of the present as events that took place, even a year ago, are treated as if they belong to the longdistant past. Globalised consumer culture in Ireland is marked by a ‘politics of quick oblivion’, which produces a public sphere that is ‘inherently amnesiac’ (Huyssen, 1995, p. 7). This short-term horizon is repeatedly asserted by the latest news from the stock exchange, the latest figures, reflecting the economic success (or otherwise) of the ‘Celtic Tiger’, the most recently launched boy/girl band or diasporic Irish cultural product.

Older people living in ‘Celtic Tiger’ Ireland may experience a sense of dislocation between this amnesiac culture and their memories of mid-twentieth century Ireland. Indeed, this sense of dislocation or dissonance motivated many of those who contacted us wishing to take part in the project (see next section). Some suggested that the Ireland in which they lived in the 1950s was outside even the imaginations of
their grandchildren. It is possible that what the 1950s generation chose to forget in the push towards modernisation, may now be seen as worth remembering as Ireland embraces global modernity and ahistorical consumer culture. In a context of rapid change, nostalgia for a past is created even if it was experienced as harsh and difficult at the time. As generational memories wane due to the ‘speed of technological modernization’ (Huyssen 1995, p. 3), the *Breaking the Silence* project can be seen as creating what Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory by using digital sound recordings and new technological storage equipment and the Internet to establish an archive of life narratives.

Although this project could be seen as a symptom of a culture obsessed with memory, precisely because we are afraid of forgetting, Freud’s work reminds us that memory is constituted by forgetting (Freud, 1959). The structure of the memories included in the archive offer important insights into memory and forgetting in constituting emigration as a feature of Irish society. Memory is conditioned and shaped by the time of articulation. It is not ‘handed down in the timeless dorm of “tradition”’ but progressively altered over time leaving the effect of experience albeit in a mediated a way (Samuel, 1994, p. x). The life narratives being collected and archived in the *Breaking the Silence* project cannot be seen as more ‘authentic’ than historical accounts, but do have the potential to expand perspectives on the 1950s, to pose new questions and to connect the ‘subject in history-as-lived with those making history-as-recounted’ (Tonkin 1992, p. 100).

**Producing an on-line archive of life-narratives – methodological questions**
Study Population

One of the first questions to be addressed in designing this study related to the target population for inclusion in the archive. This meant returning to the demographic profile of emigration in 1950s Ireland. Between 1951 and 1956, annual net migration was 39,353 and between 1956 and 1961 this rose to over 40,000 with emigration peaking in the late 1950s at a rate of 14.8 per 1000 of population. The age cohort most prone to leaving was between 15-29 years (Delaney, 2000). The target population for the Breaking the Silence project was the cohort that faced the option of emigration at the time, but stayed. As the focus of the Breaking the Silence project is the experience of staying in Ireland in the 1950s, the potential study population could include all those who have lived their lives in Ireland and are now aged between 55 and 79. However, in order to rationalise the generational experiences, we decided that the 65 - 74 age cohort would constitute the main focus of this archive.

The counties with the highest rates of emigration between 1951-56 in descending order were Leitrim, Donegal, Monaghan, Mayo, Wicklow, Cavan, Sligo, Longford, Roscommon and Clare with this profile changing only a little in the following 5 year period (Delaney, 2000). Following extensive publicity in the national and local media in early 2000, one hundred and sixteen people indicated their interest in participating in the project. Of these, 73 were men and 43 were women. All of these fell within the wider age cohort with a minority in an older age group. Some had left Ireland and returned. The geographic and gender profiles of those who contacted us did not reflect the geographic pattern of emigration, however, it proved difficult, given financial constraints, to fully redress these imbalances in the profile of contributors.
The collection of narratives

The interview schedule covered home life, cultural life, education, work life, memories of emigration and detailed memories of before, during and after the emigration of a family member/friend, the decision to stay, return visits of emigrants and visits to them, death of parents, perceptions of staying/emigrating and the narrator’s present situation. The main aim was to facilitate the narration of a life story that addressed emigration and the ‘process’ of staying in Ireland. Field workers were trained to conduct life history interviews and to digitally record these. The interviews usually took place in the interviewee’s home and lasted from over an hour to 4 hours. The longer interviews were conducted over two visits and were longer because of the detailed memories of the narrator.

Archiving

A sound archive such as this one, which is based on oral narratives, privileges the spoken word above the written word as its evidence or data. The recording itself is the original source and holds a wealth of detail unobtainable from written sources. For example, the accents of the interviewer and interviewee, hesitancies, stresses on certain words or statements, changes in tone, whispered or raised voices all give more insight into the subject matter and interview dynamics than written words alone can convey. The oral interview, therefore, includes both substantive data and meta-information on the research process itself. As the interviewer and interviewee collaborate in the production of the life story, the conditions of this production are made more accessible by the opportunity to listen to the interviews themselves.
The *Breaking the Silence* project involved the traditional archiving of the life narratives on CD-Rom with all accompanying documentation and materials for serious academic research purposes. Alongside the traditional archive, an Internet archive of 50 life-narratives with appropriate copyright permission, were published on the web with less detailed individual information. Documenting historical and cultural memory brings with it questions, debates and responsibilities regarding process, standards, accessibility, representation and ethics. The project tracked and recorded as much as possible about the research process and decisions made along the way and included this information with the library archive. Future researchers will, therefore, be able to locate their analysis in the context of the life story collection and archiving processes.

The web page offers text summaries and timed logs of the life narratives alongside relevant materials such as photographs, copies of tickets or letters (all with appropriate copyright). The life narrative log guides the listener through the interview chronologically, theme by theme. To ensure more efficient accessibility, a computer programme has been developed that hyperlinks the timed logs so that any point in the interview can be accessed immediately by clicking the mouse on the relevant point in the log. Following initial analysis of life narratives we identified recurring themes and developed a controlled vocabulary of topics, which is used in the logging of interviews. This enables easy comparisons and cross-referencing between and within interviews.

**Publishing narratives on the Internet**

Until recently, most social scientists collected material for the specific purposes of meeting their own research aims with no intention of depositing the original data in an
archive. Although it is to be welcomed that many researchers are now depositing their data in archives, there has been little attempt to make the information more accessible to the individuals and communities who have offered their time and thoughts so willingly. Once collected, the life narratives enter the domain of the academic institution and circulate within small ‘research circles’. Indeed, Gluck and Patai (1991) note that the accounts of interviewees often reach the public in the form of a text that is ‘by’ the scholar, thereby devaluing the authorial contribution of the interviewees themselves.

A central aim of the Breaking the Silence project was to make the narratives of contributors more widely accessible. This was achieved by inviting participants to make their narratives available through publication on the Internet. When published in RealAudio format on the Internet, narrators can listen to their own and other life stories. This approach raised a multitude of ethical and practical questions. Most importantly, the question of producing a life narrative for publication involves the interviewer and narrator in a prolonged process of negotiation about the construction and presentation of the narrative. The potential audience will include family members, relatives, friends as well as unknown web-users. For some narrators, a particular anticipated audience affected how the narrative was told. Many contributors requested that edits be made to the published version (the library archive holds the original recordings) and their requests were always followed. The research team anonymously recorded those issues that individuals were unhappy about making public as this provides evidence about which matters were considered taboo and why.

**Stories from The Archive**
The narration of life stories involves the depiction of events of a lifetime and the active construction by the narrator of his/her life in the present (Miller, 2000). As a result of an initial thematic analysis of six life stories, passages taken from those points in each life story when the narrator accounts for the process of deciding to stay were selected for discussion in this article. These passages are presented in groups of three below based on the particular ways in which the staying is negotiated through family obligation and moralised relationships to national belonging.
Hugh is 75 and grew up on a small farm in Co. Donegal, the middle of nine children. He worked on the buildings in London for four years. While in London he met and married his wife who was from nearby in Donegal (she worked in a factory there). Although he worked in London for four years, he sees himself as the one who stayed. He is married with seven children.

They all emigrated only me. But I was away myself you see and I came home...at Christmas (1958) and the young brother that was here pulled away and left us stuck with my father...There used to be tea boxes on the mantelpiece in them times...and he (the brother who left) wrote a note and he put it sitting up like that and he put the tea box sitting on it for me father...my father was on his own and we had to come out then to him...he was left on his own...So I had to stay then and we're here ever since and we have 7 children of our own...

Annie is a 70-year-old widow and retired small farmer from county Cavan. She was the second of 6 children and had 6 children herself. She made two attempts to emigrate, but her aunt (who adopted her when she was very young) did not want her to go.

At 17, when I went to go to America, my aunt said to me ‘What’s going to happen to me if you go?’ And my uncle was at the drink, so I stayed... I had papers another time to go to England, to learn to be a nurse and my aunt got the papers and she was mad. I would have loved to be a nurse...There were ads for student nurses, your way paid and all...I remember the letter I wrote to Middlesex hospital...I thought if I went then and she didn’t want me to go and things got sour, what would I come back to? They said...if I stayed on, whatever they had, they’d give it to me. And I said, it wasn’t that, and she said ‘What is going to happen to me if you’re gone?’ And I said I’d stay and she put her arms around me, she was delighted and I did stay. If I said a thing I would never go back on it...

Jim is 68 and is married with two children. He is the eldest of five children and the only boy. He is now a retired Primary School Teacher from Co Kilkenny.

I had heard all these old people saying you have great opportunities in Ireland and I was determined I was going to use these opportunities especially in my Leaving Cert year...I worked and worked like hell, and I regarded it then as a failure if I had to emigrate...and I said if I work I’ll get there and I would have failed on all counts if I had to emigrate. And I decided I was going to stay in my own country and I was the eldest of the family as well and my father had got sick in 1949 and that woke me up a bit...and I said the family needs me and I was determined I was going to stay at home and look after that family...it was put up to me when my father was ill, I was determined to stay in my own land anyway. I would have done something to stay in the land whether it be good or bad, but it turned out that in those days it was a good thing to take up teaching...you’ll never be a millionaire...but you’ll always be all right...
These passages construct staying and going as largely a family affair. They centre on a moral imperative to look after family members and, in both Hugh and Annie’s cases, the question of who was to inherit the small family farm. Nobody talked about who would inherit, or stay on the farm; it was never discussed in the family. Staying was sometimes the eventual outcome of a number of attempts to emigrate. The negotiation of staying and going was implicit in some cases and openly negotiated in others. A narrative of his brother’s ‘escape’ and his own ‘entrapment’ frames Hugh’s memory of staying. Central to the narrative is what Hugh saw as his moral duty to stay with his father on the farm. When asked if it was necessary for anyone to stay, Hugh’s wife, who was present for the interview, noted that Hugh’s father was 65 at the time and lived until he was over 90 years, so ‘he could well have lived on his own’. However, Hugh asserted that ‘he could not be left on his own’ and identified himself simultaneously as the victim of his brother’s escape, the one who took on the responsibility of staying, and someone who ‘made the best of things’. There was no negotiation with his brother who left, partly because he left no doubt as to his wishes by leaving without discussing it. Yet, there is some ambivalence in Hugh’s account. His narrative could be read as a form of self-imposed ‘entrapment’ and there is evidence later in the interview of his interest in the farming way of life. The question of why it was difficult to articulate a personal preference to stay or leave is raised by many of the narratives.

Both of Annie’s attempts to leave were thwarted by her perceived obligation to her aunt. She had been adopted by her aunt and uncle who had no children. Her decision not to go was also influenced by the fear that if she left against her aunt’s wishes, she would have nothing to return to if things did not work out. The moral obligation to her...
aunt is represented as trapping her on a small farm. Staying also prevented her from achieving her life long ambition to become a nurse. The negotiation of staying and going on both occasions involved working out her relationship with her aunt, but also Annie’s own sense of security in the world. Both Annie and Hugh’s accounts produce relational selves whose life trajectories are inflected by the tension between family duty and individual autonomy. Emigration is constructed as a desirable option and staying as a matter of obligation, entrapment, missed opportunities, but also of security and belonging. Staying is also central to the construction of moral, reasonable and loyal selves.

Jim’s story, constructs staying as a positive choice on his part. For him, emigration was seen less an escape than as a sign of failure, particularly when he was one of the lucky few to get third level education in the 1950s. His account echoes those of Annie and Hugh when he represents staying in relation to family duty and responsibility. However, for him, supporting his father and siblings is represented as another indicator of individual agency rather than simply obligation. Staying is also located in a narrative of loyalty to the nation and to the older generation who saw the opportunities that Ireland offered to someone like him. Jim’s is a narrative of working at staying, for his family, for his country and for himself. He worked hard at staying because; to emigrate would have been, in his view, to have ‘failed on all (these) counts.’ Staying is an achievement in a context in which mass emigration was identified with poverty and national failure. Because the 1950s are identified with constraint, obligation and the desire to emigrate in Annie and Hugh’s accounts, their relatively comfortable present circumstances become testimonies to their resourcefulness in their narratives. Despite being thwarted by having to stay, their life
narratives are ones of achievement, which enables acceptance and contentment in the present. They overcame the adverse circumstances of the 1950s to make something of their lives in Ireland and offer prospects to their children. The excerpts in the following section have much in common with those already discussed, but focus more on issues of ‘fate’ and ‘choice’ than on familial connection and obligation.
Staying – the way things turned out or an active choice

Patrick is a 65-year-old retired factory worker and small farmer from county Roscommon. He was the youngest of four and is married with four children.

I had a kind of planned to go with this fella that worked with me in Hanley’s factory at the time (1952)… A lot of the fellas that we started working with in the mineral factory had left… I suppose we felt that we were a kind of being left behind and that we were making no progress or anything… but I was in the FCA at the time and I went on a course in late November and I got rheumatic fever on the course and I spent up till the month of March in the army hospital in Athlone. During that time then he went, when I wasn’t at home… So that ended that emigration. Now I doubt I’d have emigrated at the back of it, though I had more or less planned it. I never told my mother that I’d go or anything...

Declan is a 72-year-old retired architect. He was born and grew up in Dublin the youngest of three children. He still lives in Dublin and is married with six children. He noted that he is ‘fed up with idea of 1940s and 50s as “dark ages” of Irish life and that the real “enlightenment” happened in the 1960s’.

Having left University College Dublin, this is the central part of it, why didn’t I consider emigration? Within a short time, only 4 or 5 of us were left in Ireland. They were educating people for export… architects who were Irish trained at the time had access to England, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, USA… They left for intellectual expansion, work, and with the idea that they might come back… Running Catholic Games in Ireland in 1957 that was the major thing that, when other people were leaving Ireland, that kept me in Ireland. I was going to assist in this, I was the young secretary I had a wonderful committee behind me, wonderful priests… but here was I relating to the Irish hierarchy and I had to get permission from Archbishop John Charles McQuaid… I had fallen in love with Europe and this was a way of getting people from Ireland to relate to Europe...

Brawney is a 71-year-old retired businessman from Co Cork. He grew up in a family of three and is married with one child.

I was in a different position to them (local people he brought to Cobh to catch the “emigrant ship”), probably I was an only son, my father had a business, I knew I would go into that business one way or another. There was no pressure on me to go. I also think I am sick and tired of hearing people say, all the best left Ireland, I don’t think that at all, I think the best stayed… I think the people who left took the easy option, they knew there was work abroad, they could make money abroad… They didn't have the spirit to stay. I think the ones that stayed at home did better in the long run - it became easier with time. There are 4 people that I went to school with that stayed, during the emigration period in the 50s, out of about 32 who were in the same class. They had it tough, they started businesses but they did well, they did better… they would just be working lads, but they stayed, they got married, but now at this stage of their life they are doing better than the fella’s that went abroad. I go to town sometimes, and drive up the street I see a man walking up the street, and I remember that was Joe. Joe went to the National school and after that he left and went to England; he is now in Ireland back for a year or two, retired and is back home. Now he is back home he has nothing to do, all he does is walk. A fella like me who stayed, and the others who stayed don’t look so old… they seem to age faster than the fella’s that stayed at home. It is a different lifestyle, so I believe the small number that stayed behind were the best, they were willing to take tough times… they are much happier, fresher looking, and are still working.
Emigration is constructed less as a source of personal escape, than as ‘going with the crowd’ in Patrick’s account. Of course, not having told his mother meant that the question of family obligation did not get raised and when the opportunity passed, he stayed. Staying is represented in fatalistic terms as ‘the way things turned out’. Declan’s narrative suggests little awareness of making a decision to stay at the time. The momentum of emigration at the time and the fact that so many of his professional peers left, forces Declan to consider, in retrospect, what kept him in Ireland. His account suggests that his peers were not escaping Ireland, but saw themselves as ‘of the world’. Their professional skills were in demand in other countries and by going to these countries they could gain intellectual stimulation and develop their skills, which could then be put to good use on their return to Ireland. His involvement with the International Catholic student games locates his life in the official narrative of the nation. His staying in Ireland is retrospectively framed as taking on the project of locating Irish Catholicism in a European context through the medium of sports. As in Jim’s account in the previous section, the decision to stay is located in a narrative of the self as an autonomous individual with much to contribute to the project of the nation.

Although Brawney identifies himself as different from those who left because he had a family business to go into, as the only son, he saw himself as having to go into the business ‘one way or another’. Emigration was not part of his fate – ‘I knew I would go into that business one way or another’. In retrospect, Brawney sees the four out of thirty-two in his class at school who stayed as better off than those who left. Those who stayed are seen as happier, more content and younger looking than the emigrants whose lives are marked by dislocation because they belong neither in England nor...
back in Ireland. Even walking down the street of this local town, Brawney is reminded of his own rooted belonging by observing the aimlessness and aged appearance of Joe, a returned emigrant.

These accounts are marked by class. For those on small farms and with little education, it was both a matter of having to go because there were few opportunities to make a living in Ireland; and/or of getting to go, because life in Ireland was seen as devoid of opportunities. When escape was desired, the task was to avoid being trapped by family obligation. Yet, the accounts also suggest ambivalence and a difficulty with articulating preferences in relation to staying or going. Instead, these were often negotiated through innuendo regarding inheritance and accounting for staying in terms of family obligation. These accounts are also shaped by the different perceptions of emigration at different ends of the class spectrum.

Those who suggested that they felt ‘trapped’ at the time, reflecting on their lives now suggest that, although it could not have been anticipated in the 1950s, their decision to stay had positive outcomes. Hugh expressed pride in his achievement of building up the farm and bringing up seven children on it. Annie is proud of the children she reared on the farm in Cavan and their career successes. Brawney also identifies his unique contribution to business in his area and his contentment in Ireland. Both Jim and Declan’s stakes in the development of the new state, albeit in different ways, locate their staying in a progressive narrative of the nation that anchors and legitimizes their national belonging. The separations and dislocations of 1950s emigration are erased from the present through constructions of staying in retrospect as enabling contentment, belonging, personal and national achievement. While
emigrants may have done better financially early in their lives, by the year 2000, some of the life narratives of those who stayed suggest that they see themselves as more content, better off financially, health-wise and in lifestyle than those who emigrated.

**Conclusion**

Recent interventions in diaspora studies remind us that ethnic identities are forged in the dynamic between those who leave and those who stay, producing complex and contradictory accounts of authenticity and belonging in different contexts (Brah. 1996; Hall 1990; Gilroy, 1993). The life narratives of those who have memories of 1950s emigration and are living in ‘Celtic Tiger’ Ireland are testimony to how the experiences of the past continue to inform social relations in the present, albeit through memories that cannot be understood outside of forgetting. They are also a reminder of the powerful mark of the present on memory. When viewed ‘as the life-world of a people rather than the image of the nation-state’ it is possible to suggest that Ireland in middle decades of the twentieth century was ‘less uniform and stable’ than we are told it was, or than how we see it from the perspective of the present (Laffan & O'Donnell, 1998, p. 174). Family and nation are affirmed by the particular uses of formulaic language and proverbs in these narratives. Beneath the personal stories are contests over what emigration means, how Ireland is affected by it, who is doing the defining and complex personal negotiations of belonging in Ireland at the time and now.

The assumption that the choice between staying and going was a random one cannot sustained when one considers the geographical, class and shifting gender profile of emigration (Lee 1989; see also Miller, 1990). Although concentrated among the rural
lower classes in the 1950s, people of all classes left and stayed. Questions arise then about the subjective negotiation of the class, gender and geographical stratification of Irish society at the time and, how staying subjects were constituted, and continue to constitute themselves, in relation to emigration. Whether through a fatalistic or moral narrative of obligation producing a ‘trapped’ national subject that subsequently makes good, or an active narrative of embracing family responsibility and national projects, these are narratives of belonging in twentieth century Ireland that are not open to those who left. Whether they did well, or otherwise, 1950s emigrants are constructed through these narratives as dislocated and so outside the national ‘imagined community’.

Foucault (1977) referred to memories that are different from or challenge the dominant discourses as ‘counter memories’. Memory can be seen as recalcitrant to hegemonic articulatory practices such as those of the Celtic Tiger and a globalised Irish culture. This is perhaps most often the case when memory locates us in times beyond what Benjamin called the homogenous empty time of the capitalist present. Because memory, although heavily marked by the present, exceeds linear constructions of time and identity, it can reveal ‘different modes of subjectivity than the individual political subject of [global] modernity’ (Lloyd, 1999, p. 99). It can throw up new social imaginaries or otherwise inaccessible data about the experience of these decades and reflections on that experience in the present. So far, the life narratives both spur on the national narrative of progress and modernisation and ‘trouble history’s stream with interference, eddies, and counterflows’ (Ibid. p. 1). Most of all, they force us to ask new questions about ideologies of exile and individualism that surrounded emigration in the 1950s.
The present and future of audio archiving and documentation is and will be dominated by digitisation for some time. ‘Digitisation of collected items, changes in methods of working within archives and the development from archivist to data manager’ represent new challenges to the development of multi-media archives today (Scharlau, 1999, p. 11). This will involve the development of new schema for organising information and paths of access to it. Having grappled with the numerous questions surrounding data collection practices and procedures, database management and accessibility via website, this project has developed considerable expertise in the use of new technologies in social research. While new technological means of recording and disseminating versions of the past are often seen as ‘artificial’, ‘with time they are incorporated into the accepted cultural construct of memory’ as memory is externalised into new ‘artificial’ sites all the time (Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 106).

The *Breaking the Silence* project used life narratives to challenge ‘habits of thinking’ about emigration and staying put in 1950s Ireland. It also embraced new technologies to make these narratives uniquely accessible giving them greater potential to bring attention to the charging relations between the homeland and diaspora.
References


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1 The *Report of the Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems* did not question gendered inheritance patterns and emphasised the need for employment to be created for men rather than women so that family property and family life could be sustained.

2 There was one majority report and two minority reports, one by Cornelius Lucey (Roman Catholic Bishop of Cork) and one by James Meenan (Economics lecturer at University College, Dublin).


4 In the Intercensal periods 1981-86 and 1986-91 annual net migration was 14,377 and 26,834 respectively.

5 President Robinson’s use of the term diaspora was ridiculed by some politicians and sectors of the media as a ‘trendy’ phrase for what everyone already knew too well as emigration. Nonetheless the term had slipped into everyday usage with specific effects by 2000 (see Gray, in press).

6 The in-migration of new immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees is variously seen as a threat to national culture and symbolising a new multicultural globalised Irish modernity. Net immigration reached a high point of 26,300 in the year to April 2001. Gross immigration was 46,200 while the number of emigrants reached a record low of 19,900. Returning Irish nationals continue to be the largest immigrant group at 39 percent in the year to April 2001. However, this share has been decreasing since 1999 when they accounted for 55 percent of in-migration to the Republic of Ireland. US nationals accounted for 6 percent of immigrants; 15 percent were UK nationals; 13 percent from other countries in the EU (Central Statistics Office Population and Migration Estimates, August, 2001). For a detailed discussion of the wider social context of in-migration see Mac Éinri, 2001.

7 White’s mother Sara White was born and grew up in Co. Kerry and emigrated to Chicago in 1936 and his book is based on her memories, which he brings into dialogue with history. He notes that in her life story, different pasts co-exist within different frames. ‘One is the frame of the everyday’ and the ‘everyday does not include the extraordinary’. The extraordinary, in his mothers story(ies), seems ‘to erupt out of a daily life’ in which people do ordinary things and seem to connect only with other extraordinary events. He suggests that heroes and martyrs live only with other heroes and martyrs in a time of great events, often collapsed into a container time, such as ‘the Time of the Troubles’, in which the same event understood in the same way is repeated over and over again albeit with different martyrs and heroes (White, 1998, p. 31).

8 Counties Dublin and Cork accounted for 32 and 30 respectively, with 11, 8, and 7 contacts from Kerry, Galway and Clare respectively. Six people contacted us from Donegal and three from each of the counties Cavan, Leitrim, Kilkenny, Kildare and two from counties Sligo and Roscommon.

9 This schedule was produced with the assistance of Cathy O’Shea Miles, oral historian at Waitako University.

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