Irish Women in London: National or Hybrid Diasporic Identities?

BREDA GRAY
Lancaster University, England

There is much sentiment about the place where one originated but it becomes articulated usually after departure from that place. As long as one remains fixed, there is little articulate expression of attachment to a place of origin.

—Edward Shils

I actually feel more Irish away from home than I felt in Ireland. I wasn’t aware of feeling Irish when I was at home - I was just there. You don’t have to think about it, but anything to do with being Irish, . . . I find in this country, you’ve got to go for it more, you’ve got to sort it out yourself. . . . In Ireland . . . there’s so many backup networks you don’t even think about it; somebody knows somebody, everybody knows somebody, you fall into place with things, but you don’t seem to find them over here.

—Sue, a woman participant in my research

Introduction

While culture, religion, and economics are frequently used to describe and theorize nationalisms and national identity, gender and migration are frequently overlooked (see Smith; Anderson; Gellner). Jill Vickers asserts that the lack of attention to gender relations in the formation of collective identity and the development of cultural cohesion has led to large gaps in the theorization of nationalisms. Nira Yuval-Davis asks why women are “hidden” in the various theorizations of nationhood, when women play such a central role in the biological, cultural, and symbolic reproduction of nations. Women’s guests for national identity and their complicity with many of the practices that uphold national identities are as yet unexamined (see Curthoys 173). Women’s migration, movement, and identification with nation or place have, in my view, important contributions to make to our understanding of how national identity is produced and how it changes across and within national boundaries.

In this article I investigate the ways in which of national identity competes with other identifications, with particular reference to Irish women’s emigration from the Republic of Ireland to London in the 1980s. Following a brief outline of the issues surrounding emigration from the Republic of Ireland in the 1980s, I draw from group discussions with Irish women in London in order to explore the complexities of their (dis)iden-
tification with Irish national identity. My research involves focus group discussions in which woman participants discuss their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of Irishness. So far, twenty-four Irish women who emigrated to London in the 1980s have participated in a total of four group discussions held in 1995 [six more group discussions have taken place in Ireland]. I briefly outline recent "postcolonial" theories of diaspora and point to some of the parallels and contradictions between the postcolonial use of the concept of diaspora and the statements of Irish migrant women taking part in my research. I conclude by exploring the complex and contradictory relationship between emigration and Irish national identity.

My aim in this article is to examine the extent to which the concept of diaspora can help us understand Irish migrant women's (dis)identification with their nation of origin. I conclude by pointing to important areas for further investigation. This article is intended therefore as a pointer toward questions and issues relating to women's migration and national identity that require further exploration, analysis, and empirical investigation. As important as it is to attend to the many different factors affecting women's emigration and to possible ways of categorizing emigrants, my main focus is on Irish migrant women's relationships to Irish national identity. I use the term "Irish migrant women" for convenience in writing but do not wish to imply that this is a homogeneous group. The diverse views of the women taking part in my research demonstrate the diversity among Irish migrant women.

**Gendered Constructions of Irishness**

Before I explore Irish migrant women's (dis)identification with Irishness, it may be helpful to examine the ways in which constructions of Irish national identity are gendered and the impact of colonization on constructions of Irishness. Aine O'Brien suggests that to be an Irish woman is a matter not of a geography and biology but of social construction, a social construction that must be understood in the contexts of colonial history and of the postindependence nation-state. Gerardine Meaney, drawing on the work of Ashis Nandy, an Indian political philosopher, highlights the link between nationality and colonialism when she points out that

>a history of colonisation is a history of feminisation. Colonial powers identify their subject peoples as passive, in need of guidance, incapable of self-government, romantic, passionate, unruly, barbarous—all of those things for which the Irish and women have been traditionally praised and scorned. [6]

Early colonial landscapers viewed "wild" Ireland as sharing what they saw as "the defects and horror of a female nature and as requiring similar
strategies of bridling and containment" (Sharkey 16). Catherine Nash explores the possibility of a feminist and “postcolonial” identification with place for Irish women and suggests that “the shift from colony to independence did not entail the redundancy of discourses of male power; rather, these were transposed and translated into new forms within nationalist discourse” (40). C. L. Innes points to some of the ways in which these discourses have been transposed when she suggests that anticolonial nationalist movements “are often figured as a kind of Oedipal or Family romance, in which the sons of the nation also seek to affirm their manhood in the process of redeeming the mother country, and restoring her to her youthful beauty” (10). The family trope of rescuing the mother or maid from the usurper is much invoked in discourses of decolonization, thereby reinforcing the links between nation and family.

Liisa Malkki points out that although Benedict Anderson stresses the “deep horizontal comradeship” (see Anderson 7) inherent to notions of the nation, “one can hardly miss the continual metaphoric slide from harmonious egalitarianism to steeply hierarchical family and gender metaphors” (51) in the discourse of nation and national identity. The use of family metaphors means that nations “are symbolically figured as domestic genealogies” (Malkki 63) and that the subordination of women to men and child to adult is institutionalized as a natural fact.

The ideal Irish woman, as envisaged by Eamon De Valera6 in his 1930 eulogy on the death of Margaret Pearce (mother of the revolutionary leaders Patrick and William), embodied the virtue of motherhood and the ability to transcend a mother’s desires in the interests of the nation. Maryann Gialanella Valiulis characterizes De Valera’s ideal Irish woman as

first and foremost a mother who inculcated in her children, her sons in particular, a love of country, of Gaelic culture and tradition, of freedom for Ireland. . . Like Mary, who understood that her son Jesus must die, so too did Margaret Pearce understand that her sons must die, putting the good of the nation above her own motherly desires. (117)

The ideal Irish woman, therefore, was a mother who by passively accepting her son’s death on behalf of the nation could also be a martyr for her country. Images of a suffering Mother Ireland are frequently used to represent a unified Irish national identity. They serve to reinforce the location of the Irish woman within the family and to place her in a passive relationship with her national identity as the vessel in which national life, culture, and death are contained. These representations of the nation and woman as mother emphasize the strength and will of both to survive. Such perceptions of strength, however, tend to ignore the actual struggle and pain endured by many Irish women while representing those who find it impossible to keep up this image of strength as weak and unmindful of their country’s urgent needs.
Irish women were active within the nationalist movement before the establishment of the independent twenty-six-county state, as they now are in Northern Ireland. Margaret Ward suggests that nationalist women have engaged in an unceasing attempt to gain equality with men. Carol Coulter points out that “not only in Ireland, but throughout the colonised world, women came onto the public stage in large numbers through the great nationalist movements of the beginning of this century” (3). However, as Coulter goes on to note, while women were active in revolutionary movements, they did not achieve the same level of involvement in the newly formed patriarchal state.

Ailbhe Smyth, speaking of Irishness and Irish women in the 1990s, suggests that

many Irish women are clearly no longer impressed by a rhetoric of martyrdom in the name of a manifestly male “common good.” . . . By “going public,” women are dislodging the cornerstone of control of the patriarchal state: women’s privatized place in the sacrosanct family, foundation of the nation.

While Irish feminist activism since the 1970s has succeeded to some extent in exposing the realities of the Irish Catholic family, the referenda on divorce and abortion in the 1980s and ‘90s, and the controversy aroused by Roddy Doyle’s television series *Family* demonstrate a continuing wish to preserve the ideal of the family in Ireland. Jim Mac Laughlin points to the paradox at the center of this idealization of the family at a time when ongoing emigration is a greater cause of family breakup than separation or divorce.

Indeed the Telecom Eireann Mother [an advertisement for the Irish telephone company] is the new mother as heroine in contemporary Ireland. Having shown her resourcefulness in raising children, . . . she is now seen as dutifully sustaining—at no inconsiderable expense—motherly interest in her far-flung children over the phone. (“Familiar Side” 6)

**Emigration from the Republic of Ireland in the 1980s**

Ann Rossiter’s survey of the literature on Irish emigration speaks of “collective amnesia” when it comes to the question of gender. She asserts that “the lacunae in our knowledge of Irish female emigrants in the twentieth century are vast” (189). Here I will try to contextualize my own research by providing a brief overview of emigration from the Republic of Ireland in the 1980s. As no administrative body is responsible for monitoring emigration from Ireland to England (the main destination for Irish emigrants this century) (Rudd 307), statistics on emigration are difficult to obtain. I draw therefore on academic surveys and studies of particular
aspects of recent emigration from Ireland. The lack of research on Irish women’s emigration in the 1980s means that some of my discussion is necessarily speculative.

There was a net backflow of over 100,000 Irish migrants from Britain to Ireland during the 1970s (Garvey). That these were mostly families and couples may reflect, among other things, single Irish women’s negative perceptions of Irish society and its emphasis on family life. Bronwyn Walter’s study of Irish migrants to Britain also found that women showed less intention of returning to Ireland than men. Ide O’Carroll’s collection of oral histories of Irish women emigrants to the USA in all three waves of emigration this century (the 1920s/30s, the 1950s/60s, and the 1980s) suggests that “the rejection of family life was a major theme in the story of Irish women [who migrated] to the USA” (145). O’Carroll draws on the words of one of the women (Rena Cody) when she suggests that America provided Irish women with a “wider vision of ourselves.” O’Carroll suggests that women emigrants in the 1980s “have been exposed to a greater level of education than the generations of Irish women who came before them. They have come through the years of the feminist movement and bring expectations of equality of opportunity from their home country to the USA” (12). Russell King and Ian Shuttleworth argue that Irish emigration in the 1980s can be differentiated from previous emigration in terms of the socioeconomic status of groups leaving, the regions within Ireland with the highest numbers of emigrants; and the levels of education of emigrants. Emigration in the 1980s was represented by politicians as a positive, voluntary and individual decision made by young adults in the pursuit of career aspirations (MacLaughlin, “Emigration” 243). Government and media emphasis on the highly educated emigrant seeking economic opportunity abroad is supported by some studies according to which more emigrants in the 1980s were professionally qualified than in the past (see Garvey; NESC; King and Shuttleworth). However, Jim MacLaughlin found in his West of Ireland study that emigration was “more deeply embedded in working-class and small-farming families than in middle class families” (“Emigration” 62) with many leaving before completing secondary level education.

The 1980s have seen fewer women than men leaving, which the 1991 National Economic and Social Council (NESC) report links with an increase in female employment accompanied by a decline in men’s employment opportunities in Ireland. This seems a rather weak analysis of sex differences in emigration given the continuing high levels of unemployment among women and the nature of the jobs available to them on the Irish job market. The NESC report accounts for Irish emigration in the 1980s largely in terms of the relative economic underdevelopment of the Irish economy. The 1991 Fortnight Educational Trust Seminar Report suggests, by contrast, that Irish women’s migration in the 1980s was
having an Irish name, living with an English man, and working in an all-
conscious of being Irish 90 per cent of the time.” She put this down to
and fiery Celt” who cannot be reasonable. One woman commented, “I am
types of the “Irish Catholic girl,” the “gypsy Heather,” or the “difficult
from repressive legislation and economic hardship in Ireland” (12). By
repressive legislation she refers to amendments to the Irish constitution
that had the effect, following referenda held in the 1980s, of prohibiting
abortion and divorce in Ireland and that highlight the continuing oppres-
sive effects of church and state on Irish women’s lives.

Irish Women in London—Recent Emigrants Speak of
(Dis)Identifications with National Identity

The experience of migration challenges the meanings attached to na-
tional identity and offers new possibilities for thinking of the self in
relation to nation, place, and community. Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and
James Clifford highlight the “hybrid” nature of diasporic cultures in their
respective works. The assumption seems to be that by encountering new
cultures migrants cease to identify with their places of origin and develop
more “hybrid” identities in order to accommodate themselves to their
new location. Hybridity does not necessarily mean the loss of a national
identity and the substitution of a diasporic one. It may involve an inter-
mixture of sometimes contradictory identifications, including attach-
ments to different aspects of and longings for home. While hybridity is
often used only for the purpose of undoing binary oppositions, both Lata
Mani and Gloria Anzaldua suggest that the concept may be seen as
enabling the possibility of a collective politics that takes account of
difference and contradictions.

I would suggest that while one may feel that one is part of a diaspora,
one does not necessarily participate in a particular “diasporic culture” or
community in the country of destination. This may be particularly true
for Irish women in London who, in the 1980s and ‘90s, are largely found in
mainstream employment and therefore work among people of British and
other nationalities, unlike Irish men, many of whom are still employed in
traditionally Irish migrant work (Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations
in England).

Some of the women taking part in my research felt that they were
defensive of their Irishness because of the anti-Irish racism they experi-
ence in the form of jokes or because they are seen as incarnating stereo-
types of the “Irish Catholic girl,” the “gypsy Heather,” or the “difficult
and fiery Celt” who cannot be reasonable. One woman commented, “I am
conscious of being Irish 90 per cent of the time.” She put this down to
having an Irish name, living with an English man, and working in an all-
English professional environment. As a result she had to account for her nationality and difference much of the time. She also felt that her difference was constantly being defined by those around her, with the result that she was always making choices about which perceptions or comments she could go along with and which ones she had to challenge.

Another woman spoke of the difficulties she experienced when articulating the discrimination experienced by Irish people in England.

Mary: If you talk about anti-Irish racism, people look at you as if you had two heads, as if, what's the problem, you're white, you speak English? They don't understand there's a huge cultural difference, and I don't think I understood that there was a cultural difference till I came to live here and—

Researcher: A cultural difference between?

Mary: Between English people—like, you know, English/British people—and Irish people. And my English friends sort of say to me, "Oh, you're, oh, you do go on a bit about the fact that you're Irish," and I don't notice, but possibly I do. But I only do it now because I'm living in England if I was still at home it wouldn't be an issue.

Women in Dublin also acknowledged a certain defensiveness regarding their national identity and questioned their relationship to Irishness. In one group discussion in which many of the women had been émigrés for a period of between three and twelve years and then returned to live in Ireland, this subject was of particular interest. The following excerpt from this discussion highlights the women's complex relationships to how Irishness is viewed by "others."

Lilly: I would find when I am away I either get embarrassed or annoyed because the view of Ireland is just not like... like something like the X Case [see note 7] or whether or not the Irish Americans refusing to allow them to march in the Paddy's Day parade. And I was in the States when that happened and I was just so embarrassed really, because the view of say of Irish Americans is so completely different to what it is to be Irish now in Ireland. Well, I think it is. And if you are away and someone is talking about the X Case and they have this impression that the whole of Ireland somehow communed it in that situation happening or that you are in a country that doesn't have divorce and you are fighting saying that's not actually what we are, what we are like, and you go through being embarrassed because you are Irish and that you are in a country that has situation and allows these things to happen and fighting saying, that is not actually, that is not how I see myself being... Really, we are not like that, this is a static view of Irish Americans who emigrated God knows how many years ago and they really don't know what it is to be Irish anymore. They are Irish Americans, a different identity.

Pauline: And there is a funny irony I felt. I lived in France and Italy at various different times, and that thing you know it's a very Catholic country you come
from and you have no divorce and you are all very repressed, whereas the actual lives and lifestyles of women that I . . . like, I thought women were repressed in Ireland until I went to Italy for example.

Sue: Isn’t it interesting that how you are both quite defensive, in some way, you know defending being Irish in a way that my experience of the notion of being British . . . people don’t actually feel, you know, the majority of British people don’t feel [the need] to search for identity . . . But it’s interesting even if there are things that we disagree with in Irish society, it’s still that same notion of defending our own identity.

Lilly: I feel defensive and angry and then also feel embarrassed, it’s very hard. I mean I am embarrassed about some things, situations in Ireland that they bring up, but I get angry as well because they are defining what it is to be Irish. Which it’s not. I don’t think it is.

Pauline: Well, I think it is really interesting the question, “Are Irish people more defensive?” Do you remember the time of the Landsdowne riots here [in Dublin]? Like, I know a lot of people living in England, I have a lot of English friends there, and none of them said, “Oh my God, everyone must have hated me because I am English, because our football supporters rioted.” Whereas if Irish footballers do, well, we feel, like, aren’t we great . . . whereas the English people en masse didn’t seem to feel horribly paranoid because a certain section maybe were violent.

Helen: Because I figure that when the Warrington bombs happened and there were petitions by Irish people apologizing, it was just a gross example of exactly what you were talking about.

Researcher: An example of . . . ?

Helen: Of how the whole of our country took collective responsibility for the acts of a certain group—you know, because you are Irish. You know nobody in no other country, the whole of the country, takes on the responsibility for the acts of whatever you want to call them, terrorist or freedom fighters, whatever you want to say. But the Irish people felt they had to take on that responsibility. Now, at that particular time I thought it was really sickening.

Mary: But maybe the petition was really an attempt to show that we are not responsible for the majority in Ireland.

Anne: Yes, but why should you have to show that you are not responsible for something that you are clearly not responsible for? That we don’t support it.

While some of the women quoted above identified as Irish and felt defensive of that identity, others challenge the notion of Irishness as a unified identity more directly. Lilly differentiated herself and her kind of Irishness from the Irishness she sees as represented by Irish social centers
and Irish pubs: "As you say about the Irish pubs, and being in the Irish center as well brought it home to me, and, it was something that I actually found I backed off from, because, again, I didn't do any of that at home so I certainly wasn't going to start doing it here, you know." Fionnula differentiates between really "staunch Irish" people and herself, whose aspiration to be successful in her career requires that she become Anglicized. Yet she thinks of herself as Irish. It is only when she goes home and finds that her behavior is in conflict with the behavior of those she left behind that she begins to question her Irishness. Her ambivalence is evident in this contradictory fragment of the text cited below: "I'm definitely Irish, yeah. . . I wouldn't say I was Irish." If she were to fully maintain her Irishness, she would, in her view, have to find an Irish partner and have Irish children. As she does not envisage this happening, she cannot see "an Irish future" for herself.

Fionnula: I had no family and no friends here when I came, and my objective was to get myself as Anglicized as possible as quickly as possible for economic reasons as much as anything, so I don't have very many Irish friends even now, only a few who happened to come over anyway. I've never actively gone out seeking them, so I don't ponder perhaps as much about it as I would if I had lots of really staunch Irish? or I was going to this real Irish environment and getting a blast of it, as I imagine you do when you go to an Irish center—I've never even been in one, so I don't know . . . The easiest way is just to conform, and it's boring for people if you go on about your ethnic origins, I mean, they don't want to hear it, you know, I mean, if you're making British friends, the most easiest way to be successful with your colleagues is to be one of them and to work hard and to live by their code of conduct, and after a number of years you become very Anglicized yourself. It's like I say, when I go home now I think I'm Irish, but when I get into contact with people, when I say half seven I mean half seven and they mean half eight or maybe nine o'clock.

I'm definitely Irish yeah, because I'm a product of, of Ireland in my formative years. I wouldn't say I was Irish, I would say that my attitudes are very cosmopolitan and as the years go by I would become more Anglicized whether I like it or not, I think we all will. But some more than others and it's highly unlikely that I'll meet an Irish partner unless something extraordinary happens, you know, so therefore, you know, I won't have Irish children, so I don't see an Irish future stretching ahead. I'd never be able to get a job in Ireland doing what I do, so therefore I don't focus on that because that would be a waste of time as well. So, but, I mean it's regretful, I still try and be . . . I still try and preserve a certain part of one's identity, but I don't know why . . . I suppose it's 'cause we all want an identity. But I am coming to realize that I don't really have it now 'cause I'm neither one thing or the other.

The tensions of a displaced identity are evident here. Fionnula is keen to do well in her career, which has meant becoming as Anglicized as possible, despite a sense of herself as Irish in a cosmopolitan way. There
is a further tension between change in Fionnula's life and her desire to maintain an Irish identity. She is aware of trying to preserve the "Irish part" of her but is not sure why.

While many of the women that took part in my study have experienced prejudice, they have also encountered curiosity about their Irishness. This curiosity, they believe is related to a new interest in the cultural aspects of Irishness that has developed among middle-class in Londoners over the past decade or so.

Mary: Well, I think we're coming from different generations [than past emigrants], . . . we're coming from a different Ireland and coming to a different England, like being gay, we can come out now.

Ruth: I work in a ladish culture and there is a lot of anti-Irish jokes, things like that, you know, "can you pray over my lottery ticket?" kind of thing . . . My boyfriend [who is English] thinks that my being over here is a statement about my not wanting to be in Ireland. I know he thinks things about being Irish, but he won't say them . . . It's the upper classes and the lower classes who comment about my Irishness, . . . in middle-class social life it's acceptable to be Irish. Everyone is from different places and it's more interesting not to be English . . .

Many of the women in my study felt caught between their actual lives in England, English people's expectations of them, and the perceptions of their family and friends in Ireland. One woman pointed out that young people in Ireland during the 1970s and '80s were brought up to see themselves as part of the European Community as well as Irish; nonetheless, when young people emigrate, "they turn around and tell us we can't be happy anywhere else except Ireland." She went on to say, "We always have to think—are we here or are we there?" Because émigrés are physically separated from Ireland, their sense of Irishness has to be negotiated at material and imaginative levels on the basis of their experiences of both London and Ireland. The ways in which they identify with their native country are linked to their presence in London and to their sense of absence from their country of origin. Yet, their memories and their continuing connections with Ireland are both part of their consciousness. Most of the women also negotiate their Irishness in relation to their perceived future location and to whether they can maintain an Irish family life for themselves either in Ireland or in England.

"Diaspora" and Women's Identifications with Nation

In this section of my article I examine the recent turn to the concept of diaspora in postcolonial theory and its implications for understanding recent Irish migrants' relationships to national identity. Postcolonial studies and theories of movement, travel, and diaspora have become very
popular in academic work across disciplines in the past ten years (Wolff). The notion of diaspora has raised questions regarding migration, displaced cultures, and the relationships between these and the nation. I think that it is important, therefore, to attempt to locate my discussion of Irish woman émigrés’ relationships to national identity within this literature. National identity is said to give us a sense of “place,” “unity,” “continuity,” and connectedness by enabling us to situate ourselves within the narrative of the nation (Anderson, Imagined Communities 205; Game 105). The experience of migration, however, according to Iain Chambers, undermines any simple sense of origins, traditions, continuity, or nationality. Chambers goes on to assert that metaphors of “movement, migration, maps and travel” (3) have come to characterize “our time” (3). Stuart Hall defines “the modern experience” as one of living with the dispersed and fragmented identity of “migranthood” (Minimal Selves 5). It is not clear, however, whose “time” or “modern experience” Chambers and Hall are speaking of. Despite the concern within postcolonial studies with representation and imperialist constructions of the Other, much of the theorizing takes place at a level of abstraction that blurs temporal and geographical differences.

Colonialism, nationalisms, and discourses of national identity rely on constructions of women as symbols of unity, stability, and continuity. Gerardine Meaney drawing on Eavan Boland’s A Kind of Scar points out, for example, that “Dark Rosaleen, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, ‘the nation as woman: the woman as nation’ have become for Irishwomen the sign of their invisibility, of the power of nationhood to edit the reality of womanhood” (17). Dichotomies such as unity/disunity, continuity/discontinuity, and stability/instability are challenged, however, by women’s active movement as migrants or travelers. Because of the close association between women’s role in reproduction and in maintaining of the purity of the nation’s respectability (Mosse), women’s migration frequently means a disruption in transgenerational stability and in the transmission of culture and identity. Despite the fundamentally gendered nature of one’s relationship to national identity and of experiences of migration, studies of national identity and “postcolonialism” tend to overlook the intersections between gender, experiences of movement, and national identification.

Many of the theorists currently concerned with migration, diaspora, and the mixing of cultures and identities are attempting to relocate Western cultures from a “postcolonial” perspective (see Mohanty; Young; Bhabha; Spivak; Mani). Metaphors of migration are used to account for the so-called postcolonial world in which peoples from the “core” and “periphery” live together and cannot be easily identified in geographical terms. The concept of diaspora, traditionally applied to the “Jewish nation,” has been extended by theorists of “postcolonial” identities to the
dispersal of peoples from colonized countries. James Clifford suggests that "diaspora discourse" is now "loose in the world for reasons having to do with decolonization, increased immigration, global communications, and transport—a whole range of phenomena that encourage multi-locale attachments, dwelling, and traveling within and across nations" (306). Diasporic identities reach beyond the "territory and temporality [myth/history] of the nation-state" (Clifford 307). For Paul Gilroy the notion of a diaspora can be drawn upon to develop a tradition that transcends national boundaries, as in his concept of the black Atlantic. Gilroy’s concept of black Atlantic culture goes beyond ethnicity and nationality to produce a new concept of hybrid culture, a counterculture of modernity. Francis Adu-Febri critiques Gilroy’s analysis for its lack of attention to the political and ideological role of the state in racial/ethnic relations. The British Prevention of Terrorism Act, for example, racialized housing policies, policing, education, and the national curriculum, and ideological propaganda impacts greatly on individual Irish migrants and on the development of migrant cultures.

Lata Mani critiques Gilroy’s concept of a transnational diasporic culture for potentially offering "primarily cultural explanations of social phenomena" ("Multiple Mediations" 32). The analytical categories of "race" and gender are played down in Gilroy’s effort to "create a postcolonial theory that can be applied to ‘all’ post-colonial writing," according to Arun P. Mukherjee (2). Mukherjee further points out that postcolonial theory creates "a unitary post-colonial subject by erasing the differences between and within diverse post-colonial societies" (7). Just as discourses of national identity use "woman" as a symbol of the unity and continuity of the nation, discourses of "postcolonial" identity use "diaspora" as a metaphor for a variety of experiences. In so doing they deny migrant women the language with which to describe their specific material and social experiences of migration and negotiating identity.

Stefan Helmreich critiques what he sees as the patriarchal basis of Gilroy’s concept of diaspora. He looks to diaspora’s origin in the Greek word for dispersion to support his view that Gilroy traces the male seed in black genealogical history. The word sperm, Helmreich continues, is from the same Greek stem, one meaning to sow or scatter. Helmreich concludes that diaspora refers to a kind of kinship perpetuated through men, a kinship that "suggests the questions of legitimacy in paternity that patriarchy generates" (245). Clifford comes to Gilroy’s defense when he points out that Gilroy is explicitly concerned not to privilege appeals to kinship or family and points to the danger of seeing etymology as destiny (331).

Clifford admits that the idea of diaspora is gendered. He poses the question “Do diaspora experiences reinforce or loosen gender subordination?” He notes the ambivalence that migrant women experience in
relation to maintaining links with their homeland and the new spaces "opened by diaspora interactions": "The lived experiences of diasporic women . . . involve painful difficulty in mediating discrepant worlds. Community can be a site both of support and oppression" [314]. Despite the long history of British colonization in Ireland, the postcolonial status of the Republic of Ireland, and the continuing colonial situation in Northern Ireland, Irish identities and experiences of emigration are rarely addressed within "postcolonial" studies. Irish emigrants for many centuries have been separated from their national culture through both colonization and the physical dislocation of emigration. Yet the assumption within "postcolonial" studies appears to be that colonized countries are outside "the West" and are populated by nonwhite people, an assumption that reinforces myths of a unified white identity. Ireland and Irish migration disrupt the simple dichotomies of colonized/colonizer, black/white, European/non-European. In the case of Ireland the relationships between the two elements in these dichotomies are ambiguous and raise problematic questions for "postcolonial" studies. Any discussion of Irish migration, gender, and national identity must be cognizant, however, of the ways in which "a colonial past substantially inflects the ways in which [a] community's members imagine and represent themselves" (Ganguly 27–28).

It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons for the absence of attention in postcolonial studies to the Irish experience of colonization and decolonization and to the ongoing contested nature of Irish national identity. Perhaps Arif Dirlik's response to Ella Shohat's rhetorical question "When exactly . . . does the 'post-colonial' begin?" is a good place to start. Dirlik posits two possible answers to this question. At the beginning of his article he points out that postcolonial theorizing began "when Third World intellectuals . . . arrived in First World academe" [329]. Toward the end he suggests that it began "with the emergence of global capitalism" [356]. Dirlik asserts that the themes of much postcolonial theorizing, such as that of migration, have "much to do with their resonance with the conceptual needs presented by transformations in global relationships caused by changes within the capitalist world economy" [331]. Significantly, toward the end of the twentieth century, the narrative of capitalism, according to Dirlik, "is no longer a narrative of the history of Europe; non-European capitalist societies now make their own claims on the history of capitalism" [350]. It is not surprising that postcolonial theories overlook diversity and different relationships to colonialism and "postcolonialism" within Europe if the main concern within the so-called West is to overcome the absence of a language with which to conceptualize the shift in the focus of capitalist process from the West to other parts of the world.

Ireland remains on the periphery of capitalist development in Europe
and within the global economy and continues to export labor, albeit a slightly different type of labor and to some different destinations than in previous generations. The experiences of Irish migrants, who are mainly white and most of whom in the 1980s and ‘90s are emigrating to Britain and within Europe, are easily overlooked in the wider context of global capitalist change. Postcolonial theorists’ challenges to Eurocentrism, the nation-state, borders, and modernity ignore continuing differences within Europe, the increasing relevance of sovereignty (in Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia), the significance of borders (again in Northern Ireland, around the nations of the European Union), and the many alternative versions of modernity existing within Europe (see Waters in the case of Ireland).

Clifford suggests that diasporic consciousness is constituted both negatively and positively. It is constituted negatively, in his view, through discrimination and exclusion, social and economic marginalization. For example, he relates that in 1970s Britain a diaspora network of immigrant South Asians, African Caribbeans, and Africans was formed in response to discrimination. Diasporic awareness can also be produced positively by “identification with world historical cultural/political forces, such as ‘Africa’ or ‘China’” (312). This might mean, for example, identifying not as African or Chinese but as being American or British “differently” (Clifford 312). While identification with Ireland and its different kind of modernity may be appealing to Irish Americans, recent Irish women immigrants to London taking part in my study do not see themselves as “differently” British or English. They all describe themselves as Irish, although their identification with Irishness is ambivalent, and although some of the women are aware of becoming Anglicized or developing more cosmopolitan identities. It may be easier for second-generation Irish immigrants to identify as “differently British,” although the hyphenated identity Irish-British may not be so easily adopted.

Barbara Godard suggests that the migrant woman is forced to construct an identity in the imaginary, as no territory is possible for her. If women are identified in nationalist discourse with the territory of the nation, can territory ever be part of a woman’s self-representation, whether she be migrant or not, outside of allegory (see Braidotti, Elshtain)? The remarks of the Irish women cited in the last section of this article highlight the particular complexities of bearing the identity of an Irish woman in London and in other locations. Being part of a diaspora and possessing a hybrid identity appear to have considerable emotional and material effects on the lives of Irish migrant women. Hybridity, while opening up new possibilities, involves loss and contradiction; it does not erase ongoing power relations between women and men, migrants and nonmigrants, colonizer and colonized, and so on. The discourses of nationalism and the nation-state tend to subsume women’s interests under those of the na-
tion. Despite Homi Bhabha's suggestion that the nation is narrated from the margins, the material consequences for migrant women of being on the margins, as women and as migrants, require more attention in analyses of nation and diaspora. We must analyze further the ways in which the social relations of nationality, migration, and transnationalism such as diasporas produce women and the ways in which women are implicated in these concepts, so that the "discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced" (Scott 33) can be demystified.

Most of the women participating in my study consider that they have established a life for themselves in England. Many feel, however, that their Irish families and friends see them as "outsiders" in England and expect that they will eventually return to live in Ireland. Many of the women agreed with one woman who said, "My family and friends don't think that I live in a real place. They think that I live in a kind of hostel or something, and that I can't be happy other than where my family and home is." Another group discussion addressed feelings connected with the emigration experience:

Mary: It's a feeling of loss, that it [Ireland] is such a wonderful place, why can't people stay there if they want to? I'm all for people leaving if they want, but the fact is that so many of us have to leave.

Anne: And the feeling of being let down, being let down as well, which I've now got over, but when I came I was homesick, as I'm sure most people are. It's a real bum. I left because of a relationship, but I also left because of my career, a professional career, and to do my postgraduate training. . . . But a part of me, and its irrational, you know, I feel, bloody hell, you know, I've put . . . Nobody handed me a job on a plate or whatever. Sometimes I feel that way, I can't pinpoint when I would feel it, it might be once a year or whatever. . . .

It is clear in the passage above that the women in my study have ambivalent relationships with Ireland. They represent a shift in the ways in which 1980s emigrants view Ireland. Kerby Miller points out that many contemporary emigrants channel their resentfulness at having to emigrate more toward "Ireland's political establishment" than toward colonialism and "British tyranny" (Miller 107). This is expressed in the words of a recent popular song:

It's not murder, fear, or famine
that makes us leave this time.
We're not going to join McAlpines fusiliers.
We've got brains and we've got vision.
We've got education too. . . .
There'll be no youth unemployment anymore
Because we're over here in Queensland
And in parts of New South Wales.

(Liam Reilly, "Flight of the Earls")
While some writers are willing to acknowledge the importance of emigration as a central factor in constructions of Irishness, they do not address the high levels of emigration among Irish women. Irish women’s emigration is recognized only in relation to the preservation of the Irish “race.” As Catherine Nash notes, quoting George Russell’s *Co-operation and Nationality*,

> Concern over emigration fused issues of gender and race, as it was felt that loss of those who “would have made the best mothers and wives” leaves “at home the timid, the stupid, and the dull to help in the deterioration of the race and to breed sons as sluggish as themselves.” . . . Both ideas of racial pride and racial fears were thus projected onto the body of the woman. (49)

Whether they leave or stay, Irish women are defined within discourses of the nation. An Irish woman’s duty is to stay in Ireland, where she must reproduce the “race” and maintain of Irish culture.23

There is an increasing sense in the 1990s of the Irish as a national collectivity that has been broken apart by centuries of emigration while also being enriched by transnational connections at familial, political, and cultural levels. This heightened awareness of emigrants is due largely to the high profile given to the Irish diaspora by the president, Mary Robinson. The president’s decision to place a symbolic light in the window of Aras on Uachtarain (the president’s residence) for Irish emigrants was well received by emigrants and nonemigrants alike.24 Her speech to a joint session of the Houses of the Oireachtas in February 1995 was entitled “Cherishing the Diaspora” and focused on the Republic of Ireland’s relationship with its emigrants as a matter of national importance. In this speech Robinson pointed to the potential for the diaspora to inform, even challenge, politics within the Republic of Ireland.

> Our relation with the diaspora beyond our shores is one which can instruct our society in the values of diversity, tolerance, and fair-mindedness . . . The men and women of our diaspora represent not simply a series of departures and loss. They remain even while absent, a precious reflection of our growth and change, a precious reminder of the many strands of identity which compose our story. . . . We need to accept that in their new perspectives may well be a critique of our old ones. (Robinson “Cherishing the Irish Diaspora”)

It is difficult to foresee the potential effects for Irish women at home and abroad of Mary Robinson’s focus on an “Irish diaspora,” which she sees as involving not just loss but the gain of worldwide Irish networks. Only time will reveal the potential of transnational networks for women. It will be important, however, to notice the ways in which gender inequalities are reinforced or created anew by the development of more dispersed national or ethnic imagined communities.
Conclusion

In this article I have touched on some of the ways in which women are constructed as symbols of nationhood and subordinated by discourses of national identity. It is difficult for women to define themselves except in relation or reaction to discourses of nationhood, and this may be even more true for migrant women than for others. By focusing my research with Irish migrant women on questions of national identification, I may be reinforcing the channeling of women's self-definitions into national discourses! Yet it is important to recognize that the ways in which national identities are constructed affect the policies and legal frameworks of nation-states and therefore have major material implications for the everyday lives of women. It is necessary, therefore, for women to "clarify the ways in which we belong to and are implicated with our own national contexts" (Braidotti 7). To date, there has been little interchange between the very different discourses of feminism, national identity, and "postcolonialism." Such interchange is necessary if the complexity of women's relationships to nation and place are to be unraveled and women are to contribute in a more concerted way to constructions of nation and place.

Following Chandra Mohanty's critique of "Western feminist discourse" for seeing "the West" as a primary referent in theory and praxis and contributing to the homogenization of Third World women, I want to suggest that a further "effect" of "Western feminist discourse" is the unification of Western feminisms with a lack of self-consciousness about continuing colonial relations within "the West." This effect reveals itself in the silence within British feminism about Anglo-Irish relations and their implications for migrant Irish women in London. "It seems to me," said Ailbhe Smyth at the annual Women's Studies Network (UK) annual conference in 1993, "that it's not even thought of as a question for British feminism" ("Paying Our Disrespects" 23). Sisterhood, according to Mohanty "cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political praxis. . . . Beyond sisterhood there is still racism, colonialism and imperialism" (67, 77).

Similarly, recent theorists of "postcolonialism" have appropriated the terms "migrant" and "diaspora" to describe an abstract, "universal" movement of peoples and mixing of cultures. This has the effect of denying migrants the language with which to describe their particular experiences. There has been a move within postcolonial studies to use the term "diaspora" to describe movement and migration. David Lloyd suggests, however, that the extension of the term to the Irish may lead to a depoliticization of Irish emigration. While the term "diaspora tends to celebrate the cultural aspects of migrations," the term "emigration" has,
according to Lloyd, political and economic undertones (4). Lata Mani points to the more general trend, with the development of cultural studies in the academy, of applying cultural explanations to social issues. The case study of Irish migrant women presented in this article highlights the need to distinguish between the social and the cultural and to bring the specific circumstances of different groups of migrant women to bear on recent theorizing of migration and diaspora.

Correspondence should be sent to Breda Gray, Center for Women's Studies, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL, United Kingdom.

Notes

1. This article is confined to Irish women from the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland.

2. The 1980s saw a return to high levels of emigration from the Republic of Ireland after a decade of net immigration to the Republic. I discuss this phenomenon further later in this article.

3. The group discussions are guided by three questions and by the presentation of images of Ireland and Irish women. The questions are What does it mean to you to be an Irish woman? When are you most aware of being Irish? and How has emigration affected your relationship to Irishness?

4. I am also conducting focus-group discussions with Irish women who have returned to Ireland after a period of living outside the country and with women who have remained in Ireland. I focus here only on material arising from migrant women's discussions.

5. The term "postcolonial" has arisen in literary and cultural theories to name discourses that are founded on a critique of colonialism and its legacies (Curthoys 165, 166). Ann Curthoys points out, however, that "postcolonial" as a term of critique has given way in part to "postcolonial" as a descriptive term for something that actually exists (166). I am uncomfortable with the term "postcolonial," because it can imply that we have reached the end of colonialism. Colonialism and colonial social relations still exist in different parts of the world, however, including Northern Ireland. Homi Bhabha's assertion that "post" does not signify "after" but "beyond" (The Location of Culture 4) does not allay my fears about how this term is used and interpreted. The many ways in which the term "postcolonial" is used make it difficult to define and raise questions about its recent popularity in academic theorizing.

6. Eamon De Valera became Taoiseach (prime minister) of Ireland in 1932. He devised the 1937 Constitution of Ireland, Bunreacht na hEireann, which is still the constitution today. He was elected president of Ireland in 1959 and retired as president in 1973.
7. A group of right-wing organizations, including the newly established Irish version of the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC), formed the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC) in the early 1980s. They were successful in forcing the government of the day (in the Republic of Ireland) to hold a referendum to amend the constitution in order to protect the right to life of the unborn child. The referendum was held in 1983 and was passed by a 70:30 majority (Speed). The full implications of this constitutional ban on abortion came to light in early 1992, when a fourteen-year-old girl who was raped by a family friend was prevented by the attorney general and the High Court from going to England for an abortion. This became known as "the X case." "The travel ban was portrayed locally and internationally as a 'rapist's charter' and a form of 'state rape'" (Speed 96). After the pregnant girl threatened suicide, the Supreme Court reversed the ban on the basis of the equal right to life of the mother. This was followed by a further referendum in 1992, which passed amendments to the constitution to allow travel and information on abortion.

The ban on divorce in the Republic of Ireland is to be found in Article 41.3.2 of the constitution, which provides that "[no] law shall be enacted providing for the grant of a dissolution of marriage." The proposal to remove the ban and permit divorce in certain circumstances was rejected in a referendum in 1986 by 63.5 percent of those who voted (Ward). The antidivorce lobby argued that the introduction of divorce would have the effect of impoverishing women and children, an argument based on the maintenance awards made by courts in other European countries that allow divorce (Ward). A further referendum on divorce is to be held in November 1995.

8. Family was an RTE (the Irish national broadcasting authority) and BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) production that portrayed violence and unhappiness within a nuclear family and was shown in Ireland and Britain in 1994. There was an outcry from the Right in the Republic of Ireland that such families did not exist in Ireland.

9. Irish emigration has been explained for some time within Irish historiography as a consequence of colonialism, underdevelopment, and the structure of inheritance in Ireland (Miller 92). There have been three waves of emigration from Ireland this century, in the 1920s, the 1950s, and the 1980s (O’Carroll 11). Emigration in the 1920s took place in the context of independence and after the establishment of the new state in Southern Ireland and the Northern Irish six counties as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Following independence, a highly centralized state was established in the South “modelled in every significant way on its colonial predecessor” (Coulter 23). Restrictive legislation and policy initiatives were introduced in the 1920s and ’30s on issues of divorce, contraception, and illegitimacy that also barred women from jury service and restricted women’s access to employment in the civil service (Coulter 24). Family life and motherhood, symbolized by the idealized image of a Western of Irish rural peasant woman, were promoted for all Irish women. These restrictive policies and laws were subsequently enshrined in the 1937 constitution, Bunreacht na hEireann.
Jenny Beale sets the scene in which emigration from the Republic of Ireland took place in the 1950s: "At a time when politicians were praising family life in rural Ireland, when de Valera was extolling the countryside, 'bright with cozy homesteads,' the people of the west were streaming away, leaving the traditional way of life as fast as they could" (35). Beale suggests that there were many factors involved in women's decision to emigrate during this period, including the lack of work and marriage prospects at home, the better pay and working conditions abroad, and the higher status of women in Britain and America (141).

10. Liam Ryan estimates that "since 1900 two out of every three Irish emigrants settled in Britain," amounting to over two million in all (46). On the eve of the First World War the Irish had been the largest single immigrant group in Britain. By the 1931 census this was still the case, even though they made up only 1 percent of the total population (Holmes 167). Proposals to control immigration from Southern Ireland came before the British Parliament in 1929, 1932, 1934, 1935, and 1937. In 1949, however, the Ireland Act was passed, which provided in section 2(1) that Irish citizens would be treated as Commonwealth citizens and retained the right to enter and settle in Britain without restriction (Dummett and Nicol 129).

11. Of the 104,000 returning to Ireland between 1971 and 1981, "roughly equal numbers of married women and men returned (31,300 men and 31,400 women) but only half as many single women compared to single men returned (15,500 women to 29,600 men). This was despite the fact that more women than men had emigrated in the previous decade" (Kelly and Nic Giolla Choille). I am not aware of any research so far on emigration and return migration among Irish lesbians.

12. While Irish emigration has generally been seen as a movement of unskilled rural men and women it is also important to recognize that small numbers of educated Irishmen took posts throughout the British Empire.

13. See Mac Laughlin, "Emigration," and Corcoran, "Of Emigrants," for an outline of the occupations of Irish women immigrants to the USA in the 1980s. One survey found that 54 percent of recent Irish woman immigrants in New York in 1987 were employed as home helps or au pairs, 28 percent were waitresses, and 18 percent were in office work or other occupations (Mac Laughlin, "Familiar Side" 3). "Another study found that one third of women immigrants were in the category 'neo-domestic service'—waitresses, bar staff, child carers and ship assistants. A further sixty percent were in lower middle class positions including office work and nursing. . . . the remaining seven percent were in the 'emigrant aristocracy,' a group comprising of lawyers, doctors, managers and other professions" (ibid.). The female "emigrant aristocracy" was only half the size of its male counterpart (ibid.).

14. It is important to note that women are predominantly employed in the service sectors, where wages are lowest and working conditions are poor (Daly 134). "Almost one in five women work part-time, usually paid less and in poorer
conditions than full-time jobs. Women held 78 percent of the 96,800 part-time jobs in Ireland in 1987 (ibid.). Men, by contrast, held only 2 percent of the part-time jobs in 1987 (Daly 135). The official rate of unemployment for women is lower than the rate for men—14 percent as opposed to 19 percent. These are unreliable figures, however, as many women are not eligible for benefits and therefore may not bother to sign on. "At the end of 1987, the average gross weekly pay for women in industry was 40 percent below the average male wage" (Daly 130).

15. King and Shuttleworth found that graduate women in the 1980s were more likely than men to be resident in EU countries, while men were more likely to go to the United States (31).

16. The Lansdowne riots occurred in early 1995, when English football fans disrupted play during an Irish-English football game to such an extent that the game had to be abandoned, many people were hurt, and the Lansdowne Road stadium was damaged.

17. A shopping center in Warrington was bombed by the IRA in the early 1990s and two young boys were killed and many were injured.

18. By "they" she meant family and friends in Ireland.

19. It may be misleading to lump these theorists together under the category "postcolonial," as they are widely different politically and their specific concerns differ widely. However, they are in different ways concerned with similar themes, themes that appear to be increasingly categorized as postcolonial. For critiques of postcolonial theorizing, see Dirlik; Shohat; and Ahmad.

20. It is important to recognize that metaphors of migration may be used to denote a so-called postcolonial or postmodern condition by way of denying the specific material experiences of migrants.

21. Clifford also suggests that diaspora exists in tension with nativist identity formations and their claim to "natural" or original identity: "claims to political legitimacy made by peoples who have inhabited a territory since before recorded history and those who arrived by steamboat or airplane will be founded on very different principles" (309).

22. Dirlik notes here the parallels with David Harvey's and Frederic Jameson's suggestions of relationships between postmodernism and the development of global capitalism. He also refers to the debt that many postcolonial theorists say they owe to postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking.

23. See Yuval-Davis for a detailed discussion of gender and national culture.

24. In her earlier address to the Houses of the Oireachtas in 1992 on Irish identity in Europe President Robinson referred to Irish emigrants and the symbolic light in the window of Aras an Uachtarain:
I had in mind all our exiles, all our emigrants—past and present—when I put the light in the window at Aras an Uachtarain. I was not prepared for the power and meaning which a modest emblem would have, . . . that light reminds us—that the community of Irish interest and talent and memory extends far beyond our boundaries, far beyond Europe’s boundaries. . . . Through this absent community our national constituency and culture are present in wider ones. I put the light in the window to show that the dialogue between the absent and the present is one of remembrance at all times. (Robinson “Irish Identity”)

Works Cited


Ryan, Liam. "Irish Emigration to Britain Since World War II." Kearney 45–68.


