

**Global cosmopolites:
issues of self-identity and collective identity among the
transnational Irish elite.**

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the migratory experiences of a sub-group of Irish emigrants, namely, the transnational professional elite. The paper explores a number of themes that emerged from interviews with a sample of returners, who travelled to live and work in Britain and North America in the 1980s and returned to Ireland in the 1990s. I will argue that the migratory process as experienced by these returners is framed within a discourse of modernity that is both contradictory and ambivalent. Those contradictions and ambivalences will be explored through an analysis of the returners self-identity as it is expressed in relation to work, ethnicity and homecoming. I conclude that their insider/outsider status in both the host society and the society of origin, traps them in a liminal space wherein they must confront the contradictions and ambivalences that lie at the heart of late modernity.

Key words: Irish returners, Irishness, self-identity, homecoming, modernity, disenchantment

“To come from elsewhere, from “there” and not “here” , and hence to be simultaneously inside and outside the situation at hand, is to live at the intersection of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation into new and more extensive arrangements along emerging routes”¹.

This paper explores a number of themes that emerged from interviews with a sample of returners, who travelled to live and work in Britain and North America in the 1980s and returned to Ireland in the 1990s. I will argue that the migratory process as experienced by these returners is framed within a discourse of modernity that is both contradictory and ambivalent. Those contradictions and ambivalences will be explored through an analysis of the returners self-identity as it is expressed in relation to work, ethnicity and homecoming.

The transnational professional’s self-understanding is constructed largely within a work context that is characterised by heightened individualisation, expressed in terms of reflexive decision-making, goal attainment and self actualisation.² At the

¹ I.Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture and Identity*, London, Routledge. 1994 p. 6.

² Mary P. Corcoran, “The Process of Migration and the Re-invention of self: the experience of returning Irish emigrants” in *Eire-Ireland*, Vol. 37, Issue No. 2, 2002, pp. 175-191.

same time, the demands made on them by their employers foment resistance to the dominant work culture, and fuel their desire to quit the global city workplace and return to Ireland. Secondly, returners who construct themselves as “global cosmopolites” engage in an explicit disavowal of collective ethnic identity in the host society. They have a strong commitment to making it on their own. Yet, in articulating the reasons for their success they constantly revert to the unique and significant role played by Irishness in forming their self-concept. Indeed, it is a self-conscious hankering for the traditional values and orientations that they associate with Irishness, that contributes to their preoccupation with home, and their eventually homecoming.

For many returners, however, the reality of homecoming is laced with disenchantment, both in coming to terms with their own insider/outsider status, and their perception of a growing de-traditionalisation in Irish society. Returners are the quintessential “flexible subjects” of late modernity.³ Operating in a transnational field of action they find their self-worth in their capacity to anticipate and cope with change. But their insider/outsider status in both the host society and the society of origin traps them in a liminal space wherein they must confront the contradictions and ambivalences that are at the heart of late modernity.

Emigration trends and return migration to Ireland

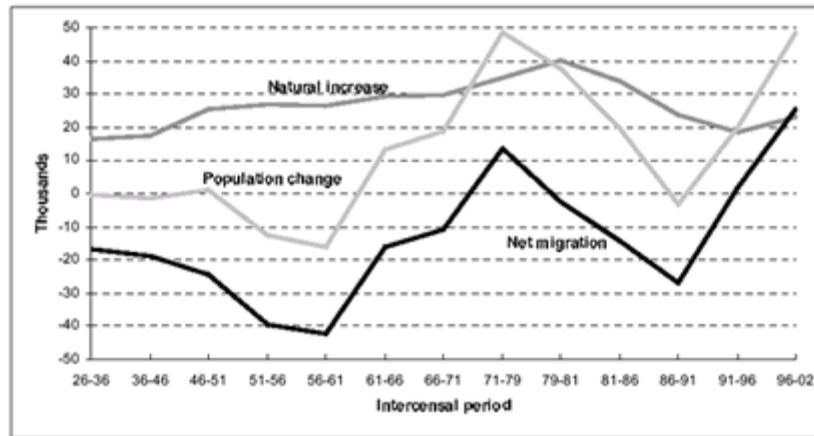
In the sixty years after the foundation of the Irish state, Ireland on average lost 0.5 percent of its population annually through net migration. In the 1950s, the emigration rate rose to 1.5 percent of the population, a rate of outflow that was previously surpassed only in the 1840s and 1880s.⁴ The post 1958 opening up of the Irish economy to foreign investment brought a significant increase in the growth rate and a rise in Irish living standards. Average annual net emigration fell from 43,000 per annum between 1956 and 1961 to 16,000 between 1961 and 1966, and to 11,000 between 1966 and 1971. This corresponds to a drop from an annual gross emigration rate of 14.8 percent to 3.7 percent of the population.⁵

Table 1 Components of population changes (average annual), 1926-2002

³ Roger Rouse, “Thinking through transnationalism: notes on the cultural politics of class relations in the contemporary United States” in *Public Culture*, Vol. 7, 1995 pp. 353-402.

⁴ B. Walsh, *Emigration: An economist’s perspective*, Policy paper PP88/3, University College Dublin, Centre for Economic Research, 1988, p. 2.

⁵ J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989 pp. 359-360.



Source: Central Statistics Office

As can be seen in Table 1, between 1971 and 1979, Ireland for the first time experienced net immigration, reversing a two centuries old trend. Arrivals exceeded departures by about 109,000 people, mainly due to Irish emigrants returning from Britain to take advantage of opportunities in the newly resurgent economy. The relative prosperity that marked the 1960s and 1970s in Ireland, however, proved to be somewhat short-lived. By the mid-1980s, Ireland had entered a recession, and unemployment and emigration were both rising again. The annual average migratory outflow rose to nearly 34,000 between 1986 and 1990.⁶ Overall then, Ireland's migratory profile up until the last decade of the twentieth century can be characterised as one of emigration rather than immigration, with the exception of the 1970s, when a pattern of return emigration was identified.

In the mid-1990s Ireland experienced an unprecedented economic boom: growth rates began to outstrip those of more established economies in Europe. As unemployment fell, analysts began to talk of labour shortages and government programmes were devised to attract workers—including Irish emigrants— from abroad. Current migration trends in Ireland, consequently, represent a radical departure from the past. Throughout the 1990s and into the first years of the twenty-first century, Ireland has experienced net immigration. In April 2002, the balance between inward and outward migration reached a high of 28,800 for the previous year. In the same period births exceeded deaths by 29,300. The combined effects of these two flows resulted in a population count of 3.897 million in April 2002 up 1.5 per cent on the previous year. Returning Irish nationals continue to be the largest immigrant group (38 per cent) in the year to April 2002, though this share has been decreasingly steadily from its 1999 level of 55 per cent. Most of these immigrants tend to be concentrated in the 25-44 age category.⁷

Table 2 Estimated Net Migration 1992- 2002

⁶ Central Statistics Office, *Population and Migration Estimates*, Dublin, CSO, 2003.

⁷ Central Statistics Office, *op.cit.* Figures for 2003 are not yet available. Here, 2002 is employed as a benchmark date, as that was the year of the most recent census from which only preliminary findings have been published to date. The total population figure has been confirmed.

1992	+ 6,100
1993	- 400
1994	- 4,700
1995	- 1,900
1996	+ 8,000
1997	+15,000
1998	+22,800
1999	+18,500
2000	+20,000
2001	+26,300
2002	+28,800

Source: Central Statistics Office

According to Barrett and Trace⁸, the current cohort of returning emigrants have higher levels of educational attainment than the resident population. Furthermore, there appears to be a selection process at work whereby the returners are those with the highest levels of education among the group who left. The current population of returners, therefore, can be broadly described as a highly educated category that has amassed considerable cultural capital and career experience during their sojourns abroad. Statistics alone, however, cannot provide insight into the perceptions and experiences of those who left Ireland and have now returned. Rather than viewing migrants' experiences purely "in behavioural terms as manifest responses to particular configurations of opportunity and constraint".⁹ I am interested in the deeper questions of how this particular generation make sense of their lives, and in particular the migratory experience. For that kind of information we need more qualitative techniques of data collection and analysis.

Methodology

In the 1980s I researched the immigrant Irish community in New York city, focusing on their economic and social status as undocumented workers primarily located within an ethnic enclave economy.¹⁰ At the time, my concern was to illuminate the lived experience of those immigrants whose uncertain status in the host society had very tangible economic, social and cultural effects. As the demographic profile of Ireland altered from the emigration in the 1980s to immigration in the 1990s, my attention turned to those who had returned to Ireland. Once again, I wanted to find out about their motivation for leaving Ireland and their experience abroad. The fact of their homecoming, however, provided potential for a further

⁸ A. Barrett and F. Trace, "Who is coming back? The educational profile of returning migrants in the 1990s", paper presented at the Irish Economics Association, University College Dublin, 23rd June, 1998.

⁹ Roger Rouse, "Making sense of settlement: class transformation, cultural struggle and transnationalism among Mexican migrants in the United States" in *Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, No 645, 1992 pp. 25-52.

¹⁰ Mary P Corcoran, *Irish illegals: transients between two societies*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1993.

dimension of analysis, and a closing of the circle on the diasporic story that had captured my imagination in the 1980s.

It is important to note, however, that I am dealing with a specific sub-sample of the Irish emigrant population. As Hickman states “While the term diaspora may be seen as an inclusive one, it also has the effect of blurring boundaries between a variety of different statuses and homogenising very different experiences. The cultural, political and economic status of the migrant worker is very different from that of the emigrant aristocracy and the transnational emigrant elite”.¹¹ One key difference between migrant workers and the transnational emigrant elite, is that the latter have considerably more agency and freedom from structural constraint.¹² Clearly, to return to Ireland is to exercise a choice. It is the fulfilment of a dream to which many emigrants have subscribed but which for the majority, particularly in the Irish case, never materialised. Only in the 1970s had people been able to return to Ireland in significant numbers. The small number of studies conducted on those returners revealed that the majority had problems readjusting mainly because of false expectations about life in Ireland, and frustration at perceived inefficiencies and the slow pace of life.¹³

In 1997 and 1998, I conducted twenty-three in-depth, qualitative interviews with returners, whom I accessed through a variety of means including an advertisement in a newsletter aimed at prospective and recently returned emigrants, my own social networks and snowball sampling techniques. My stipulation was that the emigrant must have left Ireland in the 1980s and returned in the 1990s. The majority of those interviewed had either returned from the United States or Great Britain. Most had advanced educational qualifications before leaving Ireland or had completed advanced -mainly postgraduate qualifications- on their return. So strictly speaking, my population falls into the relatively privileged category of a professional elite. The decision to focus on this sub-sample of the emigrant population has a sound basis in the empirical studies that have profiled the migratory population. A study of the educational level in 1992 of young people who left school in 1986, for example, showed a much higher propensity to emigrate among cohorts with higher educational credentials. This study showed that only 5 to 6 percent of those young people who left school without a qualification went abroad, whereas 15 percent of those who left with a Junior or Leaving Certificate had emigrated. About 25 percent of those with a higher educational qualification, however, had emigrated in the intervening period.¹⁴ Furthermore, Barrett and Trace (1998) confirm that returners have a relatively high level of educational attainment compared to that of the general population. Clearly then, there is evidence that a significant component of the migratory flow out of and more recently into Ireland, is made up of a professional elite. As Hickman suggests their experiences are likely to diverge considerably from those of the ordinary migrant worker.¹⁵

¹¹ Mary Hickman, “Locating the Irish Diaspora”, *Irish Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2002, p. 15

¹² Mary P. Corcoran, 2002, op. cit.

¹³ See G. Gmelch, “The re-adjustment of returned migrants in the West of Ireland”, in R.King (ed) *Return migration and regional problems*, London, Croom Helm, 1986 pp. 152-170, and F. McGrath, “The economic, social and cultural impact of return migration to Achill Island” in R. King (ed) *Contemporary Irish migration*, Dublin, Geographical Society of Ireland Special Publications No. 6, 1991, pp. 55-69.

¹⁴ G. Fitzgerald, “Population implications in our balanced migration” in *Irish Times*, Feb 1, 1997

¹⁵ M.Hickman, op. cit.

Interviews with respondents lasted approximately ninety minutes and ranged over several topics including motivation for leaving, decision making processes, goal attainment, self-identification and ethnic identification, perceptions about Ireland, and adjustment problems. All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The data set was analysed using the method of constant comparison. The key themes which emerged around the issue of self-identity are analysed in the following sections.

Individualisation and work culture in the global city

Modernity is characterised by the speedier and more frequent movement of people, goods, information and ideas across the globe. A number of influential sociologists have argued in the context of the new transnational economy there is a greater potential for individuals to act as reflexive agents, to take control of the shaping of their own lives. Mass education, the growth of information technology, the rapid expansion of specialist services sectors and more flexible labour markets generate new opportunities for individuals, offering greater potential for them to embrace a range of life chances, particularly in the global cities of host societies.¹⁶ The experiences of Irish returners would bear this out. Most of my respondents worked in professional capacities while abroad, for example, in financial services, the law, social work, engineering and marketing. In the host societies, they progressed through meritocratic career paths, were offered opportunities to take on additional responsibilities, received affirmation for their creative inputs and accrued financial rewards for the long hours worked. Work confirmed their status as “global cosmopolites”. It was the key mechanism through which they internalised a sense of themselves as agents, capable of adapting to different work cultures and workplace pressures.¹⁷

In the face of growing volatility and uncertainty regarding work experiences and trajectories throughout the population, widespread emphasis has been placed on “flexible subjectivities”.¹⁸ This is a very modern modus operandi that requires the individual to accept and respond to change in work, and locate his or her self-worth in the capacity to meet these challenges. The rigidities associated with old-fashioned, vertically integrated firms are eschewed in favour of creativity, flexibility and the capacity to multi-task on the job. But such an intense working environment has a troubling downside, and many returners found themselves engaging in a reflexive questioning of the meaning of a life dominated by work. They expressed their growing unease at the pervasiveness of a work ethic that is founded on a culture of greed and acquisition. This type of culture is particularly associated with global cities like London and New York. Returners from these cities questioned the penetration of those values into all domains of their everyday life:

It's just the hours you worked. You felt like you were a working machine. Americans seem to accept that, not only accept it but espouse it as a way of life. Whereas, we weren't prepared to think like that. We were more reared on the mindset that you

¹⁶ See for example, S. Lash and J. Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, London, Sage, 1994, , U.Beck A. Giddens, S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernisation: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, London, Polity, 1995, and A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity*, London, Polity, 1991.

¹⁷ Mary P. Corcoran, 2002, op.cit.

¹⁸ Roger Rouse, 1995, op.cit. p. 391.

worked to enjoy life, and make the enjoyment of life possible whereas their whole lives revolved around their careers and everything else—including family- was secondary as well., (JC, returner from New York City)

I increasingly felt oppressed in the last five years. I think as you acquire commitments, we bought a house, has settled into a stable career path, you tend to find yourself defined by your responsibilities. Once I had a significant stake in the society over there, I worried much more about the direction it was taking. London, and I would say the same about New York is a great city to be young in but it is not a city to live and grow old in. I felt London had deteriorated considerably.. by the late 1980s the inequalities which we saw in our area were obscene and unnecessary....And also I found London an increasingly aggressive city, and I was getting into that mindset. I mean interpersonal relations, road rage, the way you deal with aggravation in the street in cars or whatever. That you flare up, you have to, it's the vernacular over there, (NM returner from London).

For these returners, the desire to escape lives that were “work rich” and “time poor” was a key determining factor in making the decision to return to Ireland. They were not pulled by the prospect of greatly expanded work opportunities in Ireland. Rather, they were pushed by their growing sense of alienation from global city life, in which work is privileged sometimes to the exclusion of all other aspects of life. In the face of this sense of dis-connection, the overwhelming desire was to re-connect with a place -Ireland- which offered an alternative. The returners were drawn to the prospect of slowing down, becoming more grounded and enjoying a better quality of life:

Things go slower in Ireland, people have more time for people that they general way that society runs over there. Our structure is different in that if someone belonging to you died you could take a few days off or a month off, it might piss your employer off but they would understand it. But over there, that wasn't the model at all. They just didn't understand it, (RK, Returner from Vancouver, Canada)

In Irish society people don't take themselves too seriously and I find that very healthy. As an individual living abroad without family around it is easy to become neurotic and narcissistic. I have found less of that in myself since coming back. Irish people are very social and have a great sense of loyalty. Irish people take their friendships seriously, (LH, Returner from New York City).

The most important thing about Irish culture is the insistence –even in the most minute transaction such as getting a cup of coffee- on there being personal contact between the people involved. This is the healthiest part of Irish culture- nothing to do with saints and scholars..it's just that you are not allowed to treat people as a means to an end....It's the fundamental decency.. the way that the culture insists on accepting the humanity of other people, (SN,Returner from Silicon Valley, California)

Interestingly, the compliance of the Irish professional elite in the workplaces of the global city is matched by a kind of psychic resistance to total incorporation. As a mechanism for expressing resistance to the dominant “work culture” system, these

returners invested heavily in sustaining compelling images of “how things might be” back in Ireland. These images clearly draw on a repository of idealisations about the homeland, and the perceived capacity of Irish people to bracket modernity and cleave to a more traditional way of life.

Disavowal of collective ethnic identity

A second and related theme among these high achieving returners, is the distinct lack a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnics in the country of settlement. Such a sense of solidarity is often pointed to as a key ingredient of diasporic communities.¹⁹ Yet what emerges from returner narratives is a sense of the primacy of self-identity over social identity. The disavowal of a collective ethnic identity among returners is conditioned by the spatial and occupational segregation of the Irish abroad. Driven by a belief in their capacity to deploy their own reserves of cultural capital, accumulated through educational attainment and work experiences, returners see themselves as active agents, operating in highly individualised, meritocratic work environments. Consequently, they perceive those who cleave to an explicit Irish identity as atavistic, locked into the kinds of inward-looking relations that are characteristic of all ethnic enclaves. They are not interested in creating the proverbial home away from home. Returners reject the more traditional way of “making it” in America—through ethnic clientelism and patronage—in favour of making it, as they see it, entirely on their own merits. Thus, collective ethnic identity is negated, as the “global cosmopolites” distance themselves from the “ghetto Irish”—the latter a term embodying social class, spatial and ethnic connotations:

I eschewed a ghetto Irish association and looked down on people in Irish ghettos in Queens and other parts of New York. I avoided Irish bars, however, I did have Irish friends but was keen not to move in a mob....there was a certain amount of snobbishness in terms of looking down on the Tayto-eating, Harp-swilling Irish emigrant. I fancied myself as part of a young, vibrant, multicultural society which did not fit with an ethnically homogeneous group. Ethnicity was only important in terms of having Irish friends, I did not identify with the Irish ethnic group as such. I think if I did, I would have risked being excluded from American social networks, and developing those was important to me (LH, returner from New York City)

At the same time, an ambivalence surfaces because external and internal identity stimuli are in interaction and tension with each other. The formation of identity is the outcome of a constant negotiation with those around us, and a parallel process of internal negotiation.²⁰ While on the one hand, Irish returners distanced themselves from stereotypical representations of collective Irishness, they simultaneously felt the need to reclaim a personal sense of Irishness, which they deemed to be an integral part of their migratory persona and self-concept. While rejecting symbolic and substantive forms of Irish ethnicity, returners nevertheless, attested to the fact that their Irishness was frequently instrumental in paving their way in the workplace through informal network introductions, co-ethnics securing them positions, the circulation of information and sustaining social networks. Crucially

¹⁹ M.Hickman, op.cit. p. 15.

²⁰ Ian Craib, *Experiencing Identity*, London, Sage, 1998 p. 4.

though, the ethnic component of identity is not viewed in social solidarity terms but rather as a personal resource, that is internally rather than externally generated:

I think personal attributes are important. The fact that I was white, male, fairly intelligent and had a questioning frame of mind—who showed intelligence and was eager to learn- were all helpful with adjustment. My Irish accent was an asset especially in trying to meet women. The whole thing about one's Irishness—being a character from the ould sod- I found that very pretentious. I wouldn't have used that but it was an asset to be identifiably Irish, (AOS, returner from upstate New York)

A lot came down to the notion of being Irish, your personality and your accent and turn of phrase, your ability to articulate things differently than an American. But I would say motivation...that was what gave a lot of us a common bond, we transcended a lot of social boundaries and geographical boundaries in Ireland, our common bond- along with being in the States and Irish- was that most of us were very motivated, trying to make a go of it there. You become very self sufficient when you are away from a support system, you become stronger, (AOD returner from Washington D.C.)

The experience of living in global cities, mixing with disparate groups of people in multiple contexts, creates an acute awareness of the homogenising forces that underpin modernity. These returners grapple with the notion of what Irishness means and might mean in a world in which the local finds it increasingly difficult to assert itself against the global, and where more and more aspects of life—including culture--are subject to the process of commodification:

What we are going to have to lose is a sense of our own specialness. This kind of notion of fair play to us, we're Irish and so on. We are actually going to have to go more actively into searching for an identity for ourselves...../We need to move away from the preoccupation with our own uniqueness. What we are into here is auto-exoticism.. we imagine that we are exotic in some way, whereas all the really significant literature and even rock music stuff to come out of here that has made a difference to people has said I am an anglophone person living in a city, watch this, (SN, returner from Silicon Valley, California)

Clearly, there are tensions here between distancing themselves from Irishness as an ethnic identity or label, yet embracing aspects of a unique and what is perceived to be an increasingly threatened Irish culture. Furthermore, there is a tension between recognising what the impact of the forces of globalisation and modernity might be, and an acknowledge that the process of change in Ireland is already well underway. Indeed, the fact that returners are Irish professionals circulating in global space, empowered to make decisions about when and where to go, and when to return, is itself an outcome of an increasingly modernised and globalised Ireland.

Homecoming and the quest for anchorage

*We want to feel our community as a fixed, continuous entity...as being anchored into the rock of permanence; but we know its not, that in fact beneath the surface.. its anything but. We and it are anchored only to contingency like a bottle on a wave, seeking a quiet eddy. The very effort of maintenance can pull you under.*²¹

While the economic upturn in the Irish economy opened new opportunities to return home, the improved economic situation in Ireland was not the key determining factor. Most of those interviewed cited personal and familial reasons as the basis of their decision-making. The process of individualisation which is central to capitalist development and the project of modernity confers on these “global cosmopolites” a sense of agency at least in relation to their work lives. At the same time, the culture of individualism whose logical extension is the application of market values across non-economic spheres of life, creates a kind of existential isolation, what Giddens’ defines as “not so much a separation of individuals from others as a separation from the moral resources necessary to live a full and satisfactory existence.”²² These moral resources—generally the webs of familial, friendship and communal affiliations- are consistently seen as more readily accessible in Ireland than in the host society:

Family was a big issue. Neither of us had family in New York. We had friends but we didn’t have family. You would come back on holidays and see that so much was happening. A feeling of belonging, to come back, and even though I had never lived in Dublin, to walk down Grafton Street and think, oh God, this feels right. Its Ireland, you go for a walk on the beach and it feels right (MC, returner from New York City).

From someone who had tremendous desire to travel, to see the world and to experience new things I now find absolute comfort and joy in doing nothing other than staying in my home place. In fact, I found Derry too big for me. I love the fact that I was home, that I had an identity. I certainly did not miss the anonymity of New York. I spent an awful lot of time getting to know not just my own family, but ny extended family and spending an inordinate amount of time with my extended family. And that has been very pleasurable for me, Family, I know it is such a cliché , but for me it is that fact that this is the place from which I come. I have history here. When I die I will be buried in a graveyard with my father and my grandparents. It sounds phoney but it is very important to me that connection, (BM, returner from New York City)

Exchanging transient social networks in the global city for embedded social networks in Ireland has its own problems, however:

You get roped into obligations that you never had before, like I was saying earlier, family and friends might be in your thoughts [over there] but suddenly you are obliged to go to every christening, or events, to remember birthdays. And it is a big time drag. You did your own thing in the States, you were independent but here they

²¹ Richard Ford, *Independence Day*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, p. 439.

²² Anthony Giddens, 1991, op.cit. p.9.

want to know more about you because you are closer. Your anonymity gets eradicated, (AOD, returner from Washington D.C.).

There is a sense of not being forgiven for being away and that when you come back who do you think you are coming back, trying to weave your way back into family and be there for all the roles that everybody has taken over in our absence. You were trying to reclaim some of your role in the family and it was deeply resented, (RK, returner from Vancouver, Canada)

There is also the fact of having to come to terms with the insider/outsider status that being a returner necessitates:

Irish people can be tough on emigrants. I found it so and now I am one of the people who makes it tough for emigrants. Irish emigrants talk about Irish people as a separate category, there is a “them and us” thing going on. They criticise govt/stat bodies but they don’t use an inclusive syntax. I think it is to do with the contingency terms under which emigrants return. When I came back I was really only dipping one foot into the water. I was still prepared to go back, and I think that ambivalence gets projected into a critical evaluation of things Irish. You are criticising from what you consider to be a superior position, (LH, returner from New York City)

These returner narratives attest to the complexity of the cultural politics of class transformation and the workings of transnationalism as they are played out concretely in people’s everyday lives.²³ The desire to return is bound up with a rejection of global city placelessness and a concomitant desire to connect with a place that enables a feeling of “being inside and belonging...both as an individual and as a member of a community, and to know this without reflecting upon it”.²⁴ The other side of a sense of belonging however, is often a sense of entrapment, and returners frequently find that if their sense of identity was contingent in the global city, it remains equally contingent once they have returned home.

Placelessness and Disenchantment

*Migration is a one-way trip. There is no home to go back to. There never was.*²⁵

According to Relph, places are fundamental to our existence, as sources of security and identity for individuals and for groups of people.²⁶ For returners, place is treated as having particular existential significance. During their sojourns abroad,

²³ Roger Rouse, 1992, op. cit. p. 96.

²⁴ E.Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London, Pion, 1976 p. 65.

²⁵ Stuart Hall, “Minimal Selves” in *Identity: the real me*, London, Institute of Contemporary Arts 1987, p. 4.

²⁶ E.Relph, op.cit. p. 6 .

whether or not they eschewed an ethnic persona, they nevertheless, clung to a particular imaginary of the country and the community they had left behind. There is nothing new about this, of course, as all emigrants over the generations have been sustained by drawing on an imagined Ireland, what Heaney describes as “ a mythologically grounded and emotionally contoured island that belongs in art time, in story time, in the continuous presence of a common, unthinking memory life.”²⁷ Returning opens up feelings of ambivalence because it presents the opportunity to interrogate that imaginary at first hand. Invariably the reality falls considerably short of the aspiration and the dreamscape. However great a need for a sense of place may be, “the possibility of its development for many people in technologically advanced cultures has been undermined by the possibilities of increased spatial mobility and by a weakening of the symbolic qualities of places”.²⁸ Not surprisingly, on their return there is considerable resentment at the fact that Ireland itself has changed, its status in the social imaginary as a “special place” challenged by the creeping forces of globalisation. As Morley and Robins point out, “through proliferating information and communication flows and through mass human migration, [globalisation] has progressively eroded territorial frontiers and boundaries and provoked ever more immediate confrontations of culture and identity”.²⁹ In many respects, the gap between the reality and the desire for homecoming is partly a creation of the returners themselves who have spent the sojourn abroad, replaying “the nostalgia of difference, to set up a presumed authenticity to be set against the corruption of modernity.”³⁰ In the last ten years Ireland has become more urbanised, and Dublin has become altogether more urbane. From the purview of the global cities of London and New York, Dublin appears to have lost some of its small town charm, and become much more like everywhere else:

Dublin has lost that smallness and intimacy it had when I was a student. If I had my choice I would probably go and live in the country. Dublin is getting almost indistinguishable now from other cities, I find it quite boring in ways. It's like a watered down version of London.... it has lost its character. I mean look at the pubs. All the nice pubs have been ripped out and replaced with bars that you could land a 747 on. Guys standing around wearing baseball hats and swigging budweisers, if that is the culture I don't like it. The good stuff is disappearing very quickly and people aren't even missing it. They think it is good to lose their identity, get rid of it—Ireland and the Irish of the past—and replace it with a hodge-podge of American and British culture. It's a shame. We shouldn't throw the lot out. Even our relaxed way of life. We are supposed to have a relaxed life . But certainly in cities it is all busy, busy, bus no time to talk. If I went up for a pint there, I would just pay the money and get the pint. There was a time when you would engage in chat. People are a lot shorter with each other and a lot busier, (KB, returner from London)

There is a tremendous sophistication, affluence and a cosmopolitan air that I didn't remember having existed before. In fact, I though everyone had an American accent.

²⁷ Seamus Heaney, “Correspondences: emigrants and inner exiles” in Richard Kearney (ed) *The Irish at home and abroad*, Dublin, Wolfound Press, 1990, pp. 23.

²⁸ E.Relph, op.cit. p.66.

²⁹ D.Morley and K. Robins, “No place like heimat: images of home(land) in European culture” in E.Carter et al. (eds) *Space and Place*, London, Wishart, 1993 p. 5.

³⁰ I .Chambers, op.cit, p.12.

Not a real one, a pseudo one. And you were looking at a very vibrant generation who did a lot of coming and going. (BM, returner from New York City)

The disenchantment extends beyond the lost sense of place, to the other forces of de-traditionalisation in Ireland:

There is still a sort of naivety about the attraction of liberalism in Ireland because they haven't yet experienced the worst aspects. They haven't got to the point where they realise, oh shit, this is all happening because of liberalism. You are talking about changes in the country. Before we left, if there was a murder in the country people would be talking about it for a week. Now there seems to be one a day and its not a talking point. I don't know whether they are more murders.. whether it is drugs, or people sense of relative deprivation, or the loosening hold of the Catholic church but you do see a drift toward the American way of life. We are becoming more materialistic, there is less respect for life, less respect and courtesy toward others. The old values of decency are disappearing, (JC, returner from New York City)

There is a tendency to think we are the centre of the universe. We make a lot of noise and feel we are a bigger player than we actually are on the world stage. We are also beginning to show the uglier side of ourselves because we have become more cosmopolitan. We accept the positive side to that but we don't accept the responsibilities as others did for us when we went abroad. That is of course one of the great things about New York city. It is an incredibly tolerant place, it has to be or else it would combust, (LH, returner from New York City)

For many returners the reality of homecoming is laced with disenchantment, both in coming to terms with their own insider/outsider status, and their perception of a growing de-traditionalisation in Irish society. Ireland itself has been incorporated into the globalising project of modernity, and returners are, whether they like it or not, part of that process of transformation and change. But they are also caught in a bind. Ireland's exemplary economic performance in the 1990s made the dream of return possible, but the economic miracle of the "Celtic Tiger" is predicated on the very practices and values from which the returners are trying to escape. Returners are the flexible subjects of modernity because they circulate through global companies and through global space. Operating in this transnational field of action, they find their self worth in their ability to succeed in the workplace, to anticipate and cope with change. Yet they are haunted by a sense of disconnection from the nowhere place that is the global city, and drawn to a pre-modern dream of a place still rooted in kinship systems, in local community and in the continuity of tradition. But as Morley and Robins point out, "places are no longer the clear supports of our identity".³¹ The insider/outsider status of Irish migrants in the host society and the society of origin traps them in a liminal space wherein they experience the contradictions and ambivalences associated with identity formation in late modernity.

³¹ K.Morley and D. Robins, op.cit. p 5.

