

# **BIFFOs, Jackeens and Dagenham Yanks: County identity, ‘authenticity’ and the Irish diaspora**

## **Introduction**

One of the lesser-remarked aspects of the recent re-emergence of emigration as a major topic in Irish society is the prevalence of images of county allegiance among the ‘new wave’ of Irish migrants overseas. For example, within the extensive coverage in the Irish media in late 2011 of emigrants both returning home for Christmas, and spending Christmas abroad, the *Irish Times* ran a short story on young Irish people in Australia.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the story was on a group of Irish people taking a train journey from Perth to Sydney in order to celebrate Christmas. The picture accompanying the piece featured brothers John and Michael Collins, who “were wearing different county colours, supporting the football rivals Galway and Mayo, even though they were almost 22,500km from home”. The piece is concluded by Meabh Foley from Leixlip, Co. Kildare, commenting on her desire “to be at a Christmas Day Mass in a church near Bondi Beach ... where all the young Irish wear their county colours during the service”. The piece therefore, almost in passing, presents displays of allegiance to a particular Irish county as an established trope in what it means to be a young Irish emigrant in Australia.

This phenomenon of continued identification with the county following migration has not, of course, originated with the latest wave of Irish migrants. Organised county associations have played a major role in the ordering of Irish life abroad, both in terms of providing welfare and a social outlet for many decades. In common with the general pattern among Irish communities abroad, the peak of their influence was arguably associated with those who

migrated to Britain and the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, with recent migrants seemingly less likely to join a county association with a formal structure. That being said, the forms of county allegiance through formalised associations are still preserved in present-day St. Patrick's Day parades. In London, for example, the basic structure has been retained from the time when the parade was organised by the Council of Irish County Associations, whereby alongside various sporting and cultural groups, each individual county is represented. Despite the numerous changes in presentation and performance of Irishness brought about by the reinvention of the parade as an exemplar of celebratory multiculturalism, the county would appear to represent a measure of continuity.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1 – “Bright Intelligent Fellas From Offaly”, taken by the author at the 2009 London St. Patrick’s Day parade.

The above picture (Figure 1) of the Offaly Association’s float was taken at the 2009 London St. Patrick’s Day parade. Alongside bunting in the county colours of green, white and yellow, and signs listing the towns, villages and parishes within the county, the banner claims ownership of and allegiance from both then Taoiseach Brian Cowen and US President Barack Obama as Offaly natives, reworking the usually more derisive acronym ‘BIFFO’ to spell out “Bright Intelligent Fella’s (*sic*) From Offaly”.<sup>3</sup>

In claiming Barack Obama as an Offaly man, alongside the Offaly-born Brian Cowen, the Association were taking advantage of the recent revelation that one of the US President’s ancestors originated from Moneygall, Co. Offaly. The inclusion of Obama in the London St. Patrick’s Day parade within an imagined community of specifically Offaly people worldwide reflects the interplay of the local and the diasporic among the Irish abroad. In this paper, I will argue that county identity operates in a central and yet relatively taken-for-granted way in the articulation and performance of Irishness abroad. This reflects both the pervasiveness of the county as a point of reference within Ireland, and the use of local identity as a marker of authenticity among the Irish diaspora.

I will also argue that the ways in which translocal connections operate within the Irish diaspora needs more systematic investigation, as there are some indications that this continued allegiance to a local area, and specifically the county is beginning to be noted and reciprocated within Ireland itself. For example, the *Ireland Reaching Out* project describes itself as practicing a form of ‘reverse genealogy’ in tracing and contacting the descendants of

those who have left a local area.<sup>4</sup> Having begun with parishes in South-East Galway, and expanding around the country at the time of writing, this initiative specifically encourages a locally-rooted diasporic consciousness. An alternative approach has been taken by Cork City Council. In November 2011, Laura McGonigle, a Fine Gael city councillor, argued for a Corkonian version of the recently introduced Certificates of Irish Heritage, with the dual purpose of ‘adding value’ to the Cork diaspora and generating funding for projects within Cork. In supporting her initiative, McGonigle referenced a supposed Corkonian exceptionalism, stating that “Cork people are known for coming home from other counties to buy their C reg cars, wearing their GAA jerseys on casual Fridays and logging into the People’s Republic Website daily ... we are a people apart and a place apart and I believe that this feeling is shared by Cork people whether they live in Dublin or DC”.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the individual merits and successes of these proposals, their very existence would suggest that the diasporic nature of county identity is publicly recognised as something that exists and can be capitalised upon. Despite this, and with the exception of some historical scholarship on the role of county associations, there has been a lack of scholarly focus on the prominent role taken by the county in articulations and performances of Irishness abroad. This article is an attempt to at least partially redress this gap in the literature, and to draw on primary research in doing so. From a social psychological perspective, I will examine the discursive use of the county as a marker of ‘authentic’ identity among Irish migrants and those of Irish descent in England, and explore the occasions on which invoking a county identity becomes salient.

The theoretical basis for this paper arises from my research on discourses of authenticity among Irish people in England. In particular, drawing on Erickson<sup>6</sup> I argue that the sets of

meaning-makings around being an ‘authentic’ member of a group shape the interaction between personal and collective identity. As such, articulations and performances of the affective dimension of ‘feeling Irish’ are constrained by wider social discourses of what it means to be ‘authentically’ Irish in England. Over the course of my research, I argue that there are three major contemporary discourses of Irish authenticity in England: ‘authenticity through collective experience and memory’, ‘authenticity through transnational knowledge and practices’ and ‘authenticity through diasporic claim’.<sup>7</sup> This article will outline how ‘county identity’ operates as a discursive resource that can be used strategically to position the speaker as authentic within Irishness in England, and how this in turn, relates to the three discourses outlined above.

### **The county in Irish history**

In order to properly situate the role of county identification within discourses of Irishness, and particularly diasporic Irishness, some historical context is needed. Prior to the Norman Invasion of Ireland in 1169, the island had been traditionally divided into five provinces, but now formed a patchwork of constantly fluctuating greater and lesser kingdoms and lordships. Gradually and piecemeal, over the following centuries, successive Anglo-Norman and English governments sought to re-divide the country along the lines of the shires of England, both for administrative purposes and in order to suppress rebellions against English rule in Ireland. By 1606, the counties of Ireland had been ‘shaped’ in the cartographic layout familiar today.<sup>8</sup>

While it is difficult to trace the emergence of specific *county* identities, Daly has stated that due to their association with the various instruments of British administration, the sense of

belonging to a county first emerged among the ‘settler population’ and that “at the time of the Union in 1801, county loyalty was very much the preserve of the landed gentry”.<sup>9</sup> She argues that county identity among the majority population was a result of political allegiances formed during the campaign for Catholic emancipation, which necessitated organising voters on a county by county basis in order to contest parliamentary seats. Alongside this political shift, a cultural shift towards county identification also seems to have occurred at this time. In Daly’s view, this may have been accentuated by the Ordnance Survey mapping of Ireland in 1846, which reinforced the notion of county boundaries. While this shift is necessarily more nebulous, it does seem that the county and county identity had come to be seen as natural and historically valid by the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, O’Connor has outlined how the popular ‘emigrant songs’ of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century almost exclusively referred to the protagonist’s longing for the county, as well as the country of his (almost exclusively his, in such cases) birth.<sup>10</sup> It can also be argued that the establishment of the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884 and its subsequent organisation along county lines served to confirm the county as an intermediate locus of identification between the immediate locality and the nation.<sup>11</sup> As noted by the *Irish Times* columnist Frank McNally, it is one of the peculiar ironies of Irish history that an explicitly nationalist organisation such as the GAA should have cemented the colonial county system in the popular Irish imagination,<sup>12</sup> and particularly given that county identity in England itself appears to have persisted, if at all, far more unevenly.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that the county, far from being a natural locus of identification from time immemorial, is a relatively recent historical development. And yet, as has been noted by Daly, any attempt to redraw local government boundaries (such as extending Limerick City into County Clare or Waterford City into Kilkenny) is regularly seen as a threat to the

integrity of the county, and provokes strong opposition.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, county identification does not only appear to become salient when it is under threat, or on occasions of sporting rivalry associated with Gaelic Games. Contemporary Ireland, and in particular the 26-county nation-state, appears to be suffused with a kind of ‘banal county-ism’, to paraphrase Billig’s banal nationalism.<sup>15</sup> In one of the rare geographical analyses of the topic, Gillmor has noted how daily life in Ireland continues to be infused with references to the county.<sup>16</sup> For example, such everyday features as postal addresses, car registration plates, local government, local newspapers and other media, national news reports etc. all make reference to the county, a form of “flagging the county daily” to once again paraphrase Billig. Similarly, the county is celebrated through the widespread phenomenon of ‘county songs’, and characterised by official and unofficial nicknames.<sup>17</sup> The continual, unremarked-upon presence of such county indicators in Irish daily life may be said to reflect both the all-pervasive nature and the relative taken-for-grantedness of the county as a reference point, and as an object of identification.

### **County characteristics and authenticity among the Irish diaspora**

Given the above, it should not be surprising that county identities and perceived county characteristics persist among Irish people post-migration. There is undoubtedly a structural element to this, with geographical migration patterns leading to migrants from certain areas in Ireland becoming associated with certain destination regions and cities, as well as various neighbourhoods in destination cities.<sup>18</sup> It is also likely that it was the case for many Irish migrants that the act of migration resulted in more regular encounters with other Irish people from unfamiliar counties than would otherwise have been the case. The question that may be

posed at this point is whether proximity to Irish people from other counties would serve to deconstruct the perceived difference between the counties, or strengthen them further. Walter has suggested, noting the friendship ties she observed among Irish communities in Luton and Bolton, that “regional origin, an important element in an individual’s identity in exclusively Irish contexts loses its significance in the face of greater ethnic difference encountered in Britain”.<sup>19</sup> However, evidence from accounts of the lives of Irish people in post-WWII England would suggest that associating with people from other counties does not necessarily lead to a diminution of county identity. For example, Catherine Dunne’s series of interviews among elderly Irish migrants in London highlights some of the ‘subdivisions’ based on county of origin that existed among the Irish ‘community’ at the time.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Ultan Cowley’s history of the “Irish navy” includes a former supervisor’s assessment of the worth of each worker according to the perceived characteristics of their counties of origin:

“You’d ask a guy where he came from, to see if he can work... Donegal – a bit fiery, but a good worker; Roscommon – intelligent, decent and a reasonable worker; Leitrim – probably OK; Cork – let him stand at the gate, lettin’ the wagons in and out! Limerick – a bit of a buzz, orators...”<sup>21</sup>

Of course, from a rhetorical perspective, speaking of the Irish abroad in terms of county characteristics and subdivisions has the effect of undermining any perceived solidarity that may exist among the Irish in a particular location. This can be seen as particularly problematic in situations where the Irish abroad are largely relying on each other for welfare and employment. It is instructive to consider the formation of county associations among the Irish abroad in this context. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive history of these associations, it is informative to consider some of the salient details, particularly in relation to county identity among the Irish in England.<sup>22</sup> County



associations in England were initially organised within individual cities rather than nationwide. Both London and Manchester have Councils of Irish County Associations and relatively active county associations also operate out of Birmingham, Luton and elsewhere. While it is possible to trace the existence of county associations in the United States to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, the documentary evidence on the origins of many county associations in England is patchy. It is difficult to ascertain whether county associations existed prior to the 1950s, when most of the current county associations in London, along with the Council of Irish County Associations (CICA) were formed.

In general, the stated aims of such associations, as set out in their constitutions were similar, in that they existed to bring together people from the 'home county', to provide for the welfare of members and to assist new arrivals, and to promote ongoing ties with the 'homeland' and 'home county'.<sup>23</sup> The associations, while generally officially non-sectarian, regularly included priests in their membership and some organisations sought the patronage of bishops from their 'home' dioceses. There were also strong links with the GAA, while through the CICA, the associations were heavily involved in the running of the London Irish Centre in Camden as well as organising the St. Patrick's Day parade and from 1975, the London Irish Festival.<sup>24</sup> As such, the county associations may be regarded as central to the 'established' Irish community, both in London and England, and representative of a certain type of 'traditional' Irishness abroad, particularly associated with Catholicism and specific gender roles, which may be said to continue to the present day. For example, Nyhan has noted the large degree of uniformity in the practices of the associations, which appears to be based, to paraphrase, on the importance of 'doing what we always did' and 'matching what the others do'. Nyhan argues that the position of the associations within the Irish community created boundaries of exclusivity which were both internal and external.

Internally, the county divisions preserved a degree of parochialism that was a hallmark of Irish life. Externally, the county associations were a means by which the stereotypically negative view of the Irish migrant could be debunked somewhat; as well as a means of differentiating the Irish from other migrant groups.<sup>25</sup>

When considering Irish identity in England in the 1950s and 1960s, an understanding of the influence of county associations is crucial. While membership in county associations was far from being universal (indeed as Nyhan has revealed, recruiting and encouraging members to become more actively involved was a perennial concern for the associations), the associations appear to have been sufficiently central in the larger cities, as to become part of the collective narrative of the Irish in England at this time. Referring to my earlier theorisation of authenticity, I would argue that this represents a recreation of Irishness within a discursive frame of ‘authenticity through collective experience and memory’. How this shaped the articulation of Irishness is also of interest to identity scholars, particularly given the apparent paradox whereby identifying as Irish (and aspiring to an Irish ‘respectability’) appeared to mean emphasising one’s difference from other Irish people, through expressing one’s allegiance to a particular county. Nyhan has highlighted the discomfort that some Irish migrants felt with the inherent sectionalism of the associations, or with the assumption that members of these associations necessarily had a greater allegiance to Irishness. Indeed, it may be that county associations had as big an influence in representing a form of Irishness that people actively disidentified with – however, this would not mean that their influence in *shaping* Irish identity in England was any less.

While county associations still exist in England, and are at their most prominent in the annual St. Patrick’s Day parades, there is a general perception that the associations are now in

decline since their heyday of the 1950s and 1960s. It may be that the fact that the associations came to exemplify a 'traditional' Irishness abroad was a factor in their being seen as less relevant by subsequent waves of migrants. For example, accounts of the identities and experiences of young Irish female 1980s migrants illustrate how they distanced themselves from more 'old-fashioned' forms of Irishness such as Irish centres and county associations.<sup>26</sup> However, while more recent migrants have tended to be less involved with county associations, I argue that this lack of engagement has not resulted in a decline in the significance of county identity. It remains so common as to be almost unremarkable that when Irish people meet for the first time outside Ireland, they will immediately attempt to ascertain what county the other is from.<sup>27</sup> The advent of GAA replica jerseys has become a means for the Irish abroad to further advertise their county identities in an immediately recognisable way, at least to other Irish people. As noted at the beginning of the article, the image of the young Irish backpacker in Australia walking along Bondi Beach in his/her county jersey has become something of an archetype of the Irish abroad in contemporary Ireland. This has been mirrored in the labelling of the Bondi Beach area as 'County Bondi' in much the same way as the Kilburn High Road in London was dubbed 'County Kilburn' by, and in reference to, a previous generation of Irish migrants.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the prominent role played by the county in post-migration Irishness, this persistence of local identities and the ways in which they might intersect with national and diasporic imaginings of Irishness is something that has been neglected in the Irish diaspora literature. While local identifications have been highlighted in some past research, particularly with regard to the Irish in Britain, this largely concerns the development of hybridised identities based on the city of residence e.g. 'London-Irish', 'Birmingham-Irish', 'Manchester-Irish' etc.<sup>29</sup> Local identifications situated in Ireland are largely taken as read, and if county-based

affiliations and allegiances are mentioned at all, they are only done so in passing, without further analysis as to what drawing on a discursive repertoire of county or regional identification might signify. One might surmise that this is an indication that the ‘banal county-ism’ referred to earlier extends to the academic sphere. For example, when one of Breda Gray’s participants draws a comparison between people from Dublin and the East coast and people who would have come “straight from Tipperary and got off the ferry”, it is interpreted as constructing a class-based urban-rural divide.<sup>30</sup> While this is a legitimate reading, I would argue that there is an added significance in that rather than simply using the terms ‘the city’ and ‘the country’, Dublin and Tipperary are both explicitly referred to. This reflects the prominence of county-based identifications of place – Dublin is not simply constructed as the city in opposition to the country, it is constructed as an urban county, in contrast to the rural county, Tipperary.

Similarly, Mary Kells in writing about her research among young middle-class Irish women in London, gives an account of one of her participants (Caroline) contrasting ‘Corkonian evasiveness’ with ‘Northern bluntness’.<sup>31</sup> While Kells fits this into a North/Republic divide regarding Irish identities, and mentions briefly the role of regional differences in her participants’ narratives, I think the specific reference to ‘Corkonian’, as opposed to simply ‘southern’ adds an extra dimension to how this difference is constructed. Caroline both highlights her own identifications as being specifically Corkonian, and attributes certain personality characteristics to that identity. This blurring of the North/Republic divide in terms of counties is also found in Johanne Devlin Trew’s research among the ‘reluctant diasporas’ of Northern Ireland. Commenting on her participant Julia’s specific identification with Fermanagh, Trew notes that a number of her interviewees reported a predominance of

affiliation at the local level of their region, county or village, rather than claiming a national territorial identity. She argues that:

Due to the sectarian geography of NI, one way of avoiding conflict is to avoid contested places or spaces perceived as belonging to the 'other'. Thus identifying at either the very local or the global diasporic level can be a useful mechanism employed by individuals to avoid the need to choose a national identity which, in the NI context, remains a hotly contested issue.<sup>32</sup>

While Trew does not specifically refer to county identity, her analysis highlights how localised county-based identifications may provide a rhetorical alternative in contexts where national identification is problematic. While the issue of national identity is highly contested in a Northern Irish context for obvious reasons, national identity is also problematised by the act of migration itself, and it can be hypothesised that the use of county identities may be a way of resolving ideological dilemmas around identity and belonging that the legacy of migration provokes. Again, this discursively strategic use of a county identity may not necessarily rest on membership of a County Association. In particular, given the extent to which the county associations have been historically intertwined with the activities of the Catholic Church and the GAA, Northern Protestant membership of county associations seems unlikely, with Nyhan uncovering evidence of just one non-Catholic member in London.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, it does appear that county identity does remain at least somewhat salient for Irish migrants from other religious and cultural backgrounds, although this is difficult to ascertain given the paucity of research on county identity to date.

Some exceptions to the conceptual invisibility of the Irish county in research on diasporic Irish identities include Kneafsey and Cox's study on the importance of specific foodstuffs in

constructing a sense of Irish identity in Coventry. They found that their respondents associated particular brands with specific local and regional Irish identities (e.g. Denny sausages as representing Waterford as well as Ireland) and argue that this was an example of Irish migrants “using the links between foods and particular locations to mark out distinct individual and cultural identities operating at both national and sub-national scales”.<sup>34</sup> In a slightly different vein, Nick McCarthy’s ethnographic study of performances of Irishness through Gaelic Football matches in Australia makes reference to the propensity of spectators at the matches to praise or condemn players based on the perceived characteristics of their ‘home’ counties. McCarthy argued that:

The constant mentioning of various counties and their association with particular types of play, both good and bad, helps create a uniquely Irish space, one which adds inexorably to the atmosphere of the day.<sup>35</sup>

The observations of Kneafsey & Cox and McCarthy give further context on the interaction between local and national Irish identities in a diasporic context. While the local may act as an alternative to the national in some cases, in others the national is articulated through the local. Such articulations are a discursive form of authentication of the Irishness of the speaker or the performer; by grounding his or her Irishness within a particular locality within Ireland, this amounts to a *re-territorialisation* of Irishness. As such, local references act as a kind of shibboleth through which authentic Irishness can be verified, within a discourse of authenticity through transnational (or in this case, translocal) knowledge. If, for example, St. Patrick’s Day parades are criticised for promoting an inauthentic Irishness in allowing ‘anyone to be Irish’, simply by drinking Guinness, donning a green frizzy wig and singing ‘Danny Boy’, the ability to wear a Tipperary GAA jersey and sing ‘Slievenamon’ may be recognised as a greater level of affinity with Irishness demonstrated through local knowledge.

As support for this hypothesis, articulating an authentic national identity through evoking a localised identity is not confined to the Irish abroad. For example, Sala, Dandy & Rapley's research around constructions of authenticity among Italian migrants in Western Australia highlighted the ways in which regional accents were employed in order to emphasise *national* identities and rhetorically differentiate these along authenticity lines from those who would be unable to pick up on such markers of locality.<sup>36</sup> Harney also notes such practices among the Italian diaspora, whereas Maira has explored similar translocal identities in Indian diasporic communities.<sup>37</sup> A comparison may also possibly be drawn to the 'island chauvinism' noted by Winston James in his analysis of the experience of Caribbean migrants in Britain, although he positions this as something that must necessarily be transcended in order that migrants may "come to recognise their common class position and shared Caribbean identity".<sup>38</sup>

Of course, the proposition that county identities largely operate in the diaspora as a means of authentication by articulating the national through the local, does not necessarily refute the charge of sectionalism or parochialism. While 'flagging the county' may add rhetorical richness to identification with Irishness, an over-emphasis on the county may also be accused of undermining Irish solidarity abroad, and creating artificial divisions between Irish people. Therefore, there is something of an ideological dilemma that needs to be negotiated by the Irish abroad when drawing on the county as a marker of localised Irish authenticity in identity work. How such dilemmas are negotiated will be a major focus of the forthcoming analysis.

## **Flagging the county – findings from the research**

The following extracts are derived from interviews and discussion groups I carried out over the course of my PhD research on discourses of authenticity among the Irish in England. The data was drawn from 30 interviews and 4 group discussions with people self-identifying as Irish between March and November 2008. There were three main sites for the research – London, Birmingham and Milton Keynes, and both those of Irish birth and descent took part. The interviews and discussions had the dual focus of exploring individual narratives of Irish lives in England, and exploring Irishness as a concept; both the interactions and their subsequent analysis were informed by participant observation and contemporary media reports.

In particular, exploring county identity during the interviews was prompted by my own prior attendance at St. Patrick's Day events in England, where, as previously highlighted, county identifications are to the fore. In an attempt to explore this further, I marched in the 2008 London St. Patrick's Day parade along with the Cork Association, the opportunity to do so having arisen a few weeks previously through an advertisement in the *Irish Post*. This formed a concerted effort on the part of the organisers to ensure that each of the 32 counties was represented in the parade. Marching with the Cork group along the parade route, the reactions of the crowd were striking. It became clear that while some spectators viewed the parade as a whole entity, others were more concerned with cheering specific floats and groups, with many spectators clearly determined to locate their specific county within the parade and identify themselves with that county. At various stages, spectators would shout "Up Cork" at our group, whereas others would shout "Up Limerick" at the group in front. It might be speculated that in identifying themselves with a particular county, those who cheered specific



county groups were publicly delineating their specific localised Irish origins. By cheering us specifically, those on the sidelines of the march were able to identify themselves to those around them as members of an imagined community within an imagined community – Cork people within an Irish milieu. As argued above, this may have served as a means of asserting authenticity and belonging through public identification with a county.

While it was my intention during the interview process to establish the extent to which my participants identified with a particular county, in a number of cases where the interview was carried out in participants' homes, physical markers of county identity were already in evidence. For example, Éamonn had a Down flag flying from his balcony, while there was a good deal of Leitrim paraphernalia around Sinéad's house, including Leitrim GAA Supporter's club stickers on the car, and a 'Pubs of Leitrim' poster on the wall. Also, some participants seemed eager to point out various items relating to their home county over the course of our interactions. For example, Gerry pointed out some of the Galway-themed memorabilia on display in a nearby cupboard as well as a painting of the Claddagh in Galway on his wall, while Ciarán drew my attention to an article about his home county of Leitrim that had recently appeared in the travel section of an English newspaper.

For many of my older respondents, discourses around county identity centred on their involvement in county associations. This was not unexpected, given the historical centrality of these associations to Irish experience in England, as previously discussed. For example, Peg, who had migrated to London in the 1940s, after previously mentioning that she and her husband had been "up to their eyes in associations and all sorts", expanded on the role of the county associations as a welfare service in the following way:

**Peg:** The good thing about them was there was no religion, no politics, you know they were for every-anybody that was in trouble or anybody that just needed help, you know, so we used to get letters from people here like, you know living and you know there was someone died belonged to them and they couldn't pay for the funeral or something you know and we'd send them money you know with er-well we'd go and visit them to make sure that they were right like, we used go to visit them and you'd bring, you'd have the cheque book with you and you give them the cheque to help pay the funeral and somebody else would go and maybe send the child to Lourdes and, oh there was all sorts of things like that you'd do and it was a great place for youngsters coming over because they wouldn't know anybody you know and they'd come to the Irish Centre and when they'd come to the Irish Centre there they'd be sort of they'd ask them where they came from and they say you said Galway, Cork and Kerry or wherever and they'd say now come down Monday night there's a meeting with the Cork Association or the Galway Association, all that, you know

In common with the tendency discussed earlier for the county associations to present themselves officially as non-sectarian and non-party political, Peg emphasises that the associations operated primarily as *welfare* providers and that there was “no religion, no politics”. However, in describing their operations, she draws on a register of religious rituals in discussing helping to pay for funerals, and in particular, the reference to sending “the child to Lourdes”: a specifically Roman Catholic place of pilgrimage. The reference to “no religion” in Peg’s narrative apparently does not take into account the ‘benign’ ways in which religion operated, so it can be surmised that it is a reference to the potentially divisive nature of religion, perhaps with regard to the ‘sectarian’ Troubles.

In stressing that the associations were for “anyone that was in trouble”, Peg constructs them as open and having no bar on receiving assistance. However, this is apparently contradicted in

her account of how the provision of welfare operated, with new arrivals being referred to the relevant county. It might be suggested that the effect of this immediate division of the Irish on arrival according to their county of birth would be to undermine solidarity among Irish migrants – a potential ideological dilemma that Peg later attempts to redress.

**Marc:** So you saying they used to set the young people up with the, with their county of origin kind of, if you're from Galway get some help from the Galway Association

**Peg:** Yes, yes, but if you couldn't help them, and we could, you know we didn't say well I can't help you because you're from Kerry [**Marc:** *laugh*] y'know, not that but well you'd ring the Kerry people and you'd say now do you, have you anything around, you see a lot of our crowd were builders and you could get them jobs, you know, you knew people and in the different trades, so you could get them a job, so if I didn't have a job for some young lad I-you'd ring up Kerry and you'd say have you, is there anything going, can you fix this young lad up?' They'd never say no, they'd always find him something you know

Peg here emphasises that county identity was not a bar on receiving assistance in that “a young lad” would not be refused help for being from the ‘wrong’ county – Kerry rather than Galway in this instance. At the same time, however, she explains how they would then put the applicant in touch with the ‘right’ county. The assumption underpinning this would appear to be that anyone applying for assistance would identify with a singular county, and also that his fellow county people were seen as having responsibility for his welfare. She also emphasises the means in which the county associations worked as an informal network for securing employment, particularly in construction. It is notable that the archetypal figure constructed here of the emigrant in need of assistance is male, rather than female – this may reflect the more casual nature of Irish male employment at the time, but it may also be reflective of contemporary gender roles within the Irish community.

To a large extent those of my participants who had been involved in county associations stressed their positive impact while downplaying any notion that they might undermine Irish solidarity. Betty, who migrated from Leitrim to London in the 1950s, however, had a more critical take on the way the county associations had been set up in order to bring people from the same county together:

**Betty:** Now about the county associations; first of all, when I came here, I discovered that the Mayo girls and boys did not mix with us. Cork people were the pits ohh! [**Marc:** *(laughs)*]; Gods own county, the Devils own people. The Kerry people, to be avoided, Dublin jackeens, and there was this dreadful feeling of animosity towards other counties, and I looked at it and I said ‘What’s all this about?’, and a lot of them would say ‘Well’, for instance Mayo, they beat us at football so often ... and as a girl I didn’t play football, so, I didn’t see the point of it, but there was no chance of me getting off with a Mayo chap; ‘err, forget about it! And then you had, we had these divisions, so I think it was terribly much the herd instinct or the clan instinct, or the extended family. You see in, where I lived, we were an extended family really; there was a cousin here and an aunt there and, y’know, so I think that was it; there were, there were little cohesive groups.

Betty’s narrative here voices the prevailing attitudes towards people from other counties and their perceived characteristics that she ‘discovered’ on arriving in London. Through her use of reported speech in constructing prototypical county rivalries in this extract, she positions herself as not subscribing to these discourses, and yet constrained by them. Although she claims not to have seen the point of the gendered sporting rivalry between her own county of Leitrim and Mayo, its existence meant that there was ‘no chance of getting off with a Mayo chap’. She then draws on a historical register of the “herd or clan instinct” in order to explain these county-based rivalries, thus positioning them within a discourse of the outmoded and

pre-modern. She later elaborated on the effect these “little cohesive groups” had on intra-Irish solidarity.

**Betty:** But then it became a county man’s association; I mean there was the Leitrim Man’s Association, and the Limerick Man’s Association, but then if you look at the Limerick Association you’d find there was several tow- parish associations as well that would have nothing to do with the city of Limerick, everyone would drink poison. And I thought ‘dear God’ and it, that also came as a great surprise because as far as I was concerned we were all Irish, and I spoke Gaelic; I thought we’d all speak Gaelic and what a; not a hope in Hell; no, no, no, no. So we became, and I think there was divide and rule situation going on as well; if we united together it would be a disaster, so keep it as in little, little groups competing with each other, for what?

Betty here contrasts her idealised vision of a united Gaelic-speaking solidarity among Irish migrants with the divided scenario she describes encountering. Her reference to speaking Gaelic may draw upon a discourse of authentic Irishness being specifically Gaelic-speaking, or it may also be a means by which the Irish could possibly have collectively distinguished themselves from the English, thereby enhancing their sense of solidarity as migrants in a strange land. Rather than this, however, Betty emphasises the extent of intra-Irish disagreements, with urban-rural divides even occurring within county associations themselves. She further suggests that such divisions were encouraged by the authorities in order to prevent the Irish in England uniting. Who the authorities are in this situation she does not quite make clear, although elsewhere in the interview, she speaks scathingly about the relationship between church and state power in 1940s/1950s Ireland, which might give some indication as to whom she’s referring. Also her emphasis on the original names of the county

associations, as County *Man*'s associations may also suggest a gendered element to these divisions.

Whether portrayed positively or negatively, it is clear from Peg and Betty's accounts that county associations are central to the collective memory of a certain experience of Irishness in England in the 1950s and 1960s, and as such, shape the discourse of Irish authenticity through collective experience and memory. As already pointed out, later generations of migrants have tended not to get involved in county associations to quite the same extent, whether from less need for the kind of welfare services they provided, or due to their perceived association with the kind of 'old-fashioned' tribal Irishness discussed above. However, this does not mean that local, county-based identities became any less salient, but more that they were expressed in a different way. Rather than county identities being a subset of national identities, or national identities writ small, the two were employed by participants in quite fluid ways, with local or national identifications becoming salient and prioritised over the other, depending on the context. For example, Liam, a relatively recent migrant in his twenties living in London, mentions occasions on which he prioritises his 'Kerryiness' ahead of his Irishness:

**Liam:** Yeah, I mean, people sure are very proud of their county; very proud. I mean, if you read in the papers about Brian Cowen, the big party he had down in Offaly last week, you know, like at home, that's the case too like; Kerry men see themselves as being, not just Irish, but Kerry men as well; you know. I would have those type of beliefs, I'd be very proud of being from Kerry more so than being from Ireland, you know. It's like an extra star in your collar, you know.

**Marc:** I mean, would you introduce yourself as a Kerry man if you're meeting other people over here?

**Liam:** If I meet an Irish person I'd say I'm from Killarney; I would never say I'm from Kerry even; I just say 'Killarney', because everyone knows Killarney [**Marc:** well, yeah]. I mean it's funny really isn't it when you think about it like that, but yeah I would always let people know I'm from Kerry, yeah; I like that idea, 'cos everyone knows Kerry, everyone goes on holidays to Kerry and d'you know, so. That's probably a big thing, yeah, not to worry about being, about identifying myself as being Irish all the time, you know; people generally know anyway, so I don't make a big deal out of it. You know, but if I'm talking to someone from Ireland, I will say like 'oh, Where are you from yourself?' kind of thing

Liam, in describing himself as being more proud to be from Kerry than from Ireland constructs this as being a typical attitude, both among Kerry people and among other Irish. He uses the contemporary emphasis on the then new Taoiseach Brian Cowen's status as an Offaly man to highlight the normative nature of 'county pride'. Having said that, when I question him about self-presentation, he draws a distinction between introducing himself as being from Killarney to other Irish people, while introducing himself as being from Kerry in other contexts. There is a dialogic aspect to this self-introduction that rests on the assumption that "everyone knows" either Killarney or Kerry depending on the context, but where the imagined audience is composed of Irish people, Liam constructs an identification with his specific hometown as being more salient than his home county. While this form of town/county identification may fluctuate, Liam presents himself as not being overly concerned to "make a big deal" out of his Irishness, as this is something that is generally known. It may be that Liam is constructing his Kerry identity as being more *personally* authentic as well as a means of disidentifying from a collective Irishness in certain contexts. Also, there would appear to be a greater stake in articulating an identity that is not immediately apparent (but is yet assumed to be well known, once flagged) and this may shape the ways in which county identity is discussed among the Irish in England.

Simultaneously, however, while Liam draws on his Kerry identity to construct a more personally *authentic* Irish identity, this exists alongside a discourse of intra-county solidarity. Earlier in the interview, when I first broached the topic of county identity, Liam stressed his friendships with migrants from other counties:

**Marc:** I'm interested in going back to this idea of you described people coming from different areas of Ireland as hanging round the different groups and doing different kinds of work. Would you find it, you'd sometimes have more in common with people from say the south west than you might with people from Dublin or people from Donegal?

**Liam:** Kerry people anyway are always very proud of being Kerry as you can imagine. Kerry people see themselves as better than everyone else anyway and they always do and they always will because that's the way you're brought up to be (*laughs*), so 'erm; no actually, I mean I've, the gang, my four best friends over here will be a lad from Derry, a lad from Galway, a lad from Monaghan. David's from Kerry inside there, another lad from Kerry maybe, if you say six and a lad from Dublin, from south Dublin

Liam initially answers my question about having more in common with people from the south-west by stressing the strength of Kerry identity and Kerry pride. The fact that he answers a question couched in individual terms, by using the collective of 'Kerry people' asserts the prototypicality of Kerry pride; it is not just that he sees himself as superior due to being from Kerry, but that this perceived superiority is an intrinsic part of what being a Kerry person is. Liam's laughter indicates that this assertion should be received humorously, but it also serves to reinforce the way in which his own identity is situated within an established narrative of what it means to be a Kerry person. Having made his humorous assertion, he then explains that 'actually', his best friends come from a variety of counties. Liam therefore



negotiates the ideological dilemma of county identity potentially causing divisions among Irish migrants, by positioning his assertion of Kerry superiority as humorous bombast, and stressing that, in reality, his 'gang' come from a variety of counties.

From this, and referring back to McCarthy's account of the invocation of county characteristics at GAA matches in Australia, it would appear that flagging one's county identity allows for a specific, potentially more 'authentic' form of self-identification, and also enables good-humoured county-based rivalry. Furthermore, being sufficiently informed to participate within this county-based rivalry seems to be constructed as a prerequisite for claiming 'authentic' Irishness. For example, in the following extract, Matthew a Birmingham-based migrant in his thirties, speaks about the identities he prioritises when meeting new people:

**Marc:** so if you were introducing yourself to somebody, where would you say you were from?

**Matthew:** If I met somebody in the UK?

**Marc:** Yeah

**Matthew :** If I met somebody in the UK and I knew they were, and they had an Irish element to them, I would introduce myself as a Corkman [**Marc:** right], almost as a way of banter, immediately, y'know, you're straight in there, immediately into, into the slagging match, I suppose, but if I met somebody, y'know, if I met somebody in the school next week, and I wouldn't necessarily introduce myself as anything other than myself, they usually pick up on my accent and more often than not will make reference to it and that, at which point I would say I'm Irish and then I would say, well, if they ask me more specifically, I'd say Cork, so yeah, I suppose I have a duality in that sense, if I know they

have Irish links I tend to go for Cork, if it's UK-based people or people who don't necessarily have an affinity with Ireland, I would just say Irish, Southern Irish or way down South, or something like that I'd say.

Matthew makes a distinction between introducing himself to anyone with "an Irish element to them" and anyone else in, for example, a professional setting, where for the former he introduces himself as a Corkman, and with the latter he takes a more individualist position. Similarly to Liam, he claims that he wouldn't 'necessarily introduce myself as anything other than myself', unless he's questioned about his accent or his Irishness. The element of humorous rivalry is also present, where Matthew indicates that presenting himself as a Corkman is done by way of 'banter', and to encourage 'a slagging match'.

Interestingly, Matthew uses a range of descriptions for those to whom he introduces himself as a Corkman, including "an Irish element", "Irish links" and "an affinity with Ireland". The effect of this is to expand the number of people who would both identify with, and have knowledge of Ireland, beyond those of Irish birth. Crucially, in identifying himself as a Corkman to this cohort, and stating that this is "almost by way of banter" there is an assumption that to have an affinity with Ireland is to be familiar with perceived county characteristics – in other words, in order to be able to engage in banter or "a slagging match", one has to have some familiarity with what being from Cork is perceived to mean. This specific form of transnational knowledge, rather than the more bounded category of birth, is positioned as an expected facet in "having an Irish element".

The extent to which this has implications for expressions of second-generation Irish identities in England will be explored later, but it is first worthwhile to return to the question of gender. I have already noted the gendered nature of the county associations, and while more recent

migrants tend not to participate in these associations to the same extent, it may be argued that the discursive relationship of county identity with sporting rivalry, good-humoured banter, and male friendship in the accounts of Liam and Matthew is suggestive of a continuing link between county identity and masculinity. The extract below from my interview with Sharon, who moved to London as a young woman in the 1980s, is prompted by such a suggestion:

**Marc:** I was talking to a woman again in the pub the other night who was second generation and I mentioned to her about the county associations running the St. Patrick's day parades and the way to which, I mean you've said being from Limerick is very important [**Sharon:** it's very, very, very important to me yeah] ... so I was mentioning to her that I thought that local identities were quite important to you and it was important to second generation Irish people in London as well ... and her reaction was that she thought that was a boy thing

**Sharon:** Ah, no-no-no-no, where's she from?

**Marc:** Ah she was [**Sharon:** out of interest (*laugh*)] from I think her, Kerry I think was her

**Sharon:** Kerry's a weird one [**Marc:** *laugh*] okay, no but it is, a female relatio-er- Limerick is a very tough woman's stronghold it always was ... It is just, I mean that to me is being very important, is-is very important and I would say in Cork as well is be more female, you know strength wise, they're tougher, I don't know, I mean it could be bullshit, it's one of those things but just when you grow up and how I know and see Limerick it-the most oral people in Limerick are women ...

It is interesting that Sharon's initial negative reaction to the suggestion that county identification could be 'a boy thing' is immediately followed by a request for further information as to where the woman who had initially made the suggestion is from; something

that is understood by both parties in the conversation as referring to an Irish county, rather than, for example, an area of London. The fact that this is treated as necessary information for evaluating the suggestion serves to underline the extent to which one's experience of Irishness is assumed to be filtered through belonging to a specific county. Sharon then begins to outline a kind of intersectionality when it comes to county identity and gender, where her identity as a Limerick *woman* denotes a specific set of experiences:

**Sharon:** I mean definitely in Limerick there's no doubt about it you know it's very, I think it's very important where you're from isn't it?

**Marc:** Very important where you are from on a local basis, you mean

**Sharon:** Well, when you're Irish, yes I do yeah, I think it is very important, you know, I mean with Limerick, you know what Limerick is like, and I'm Limerick-Limerick-Limerick-Limerick-Limerick (*laugh*) but it's one of those places that no one likes, so you fight, you're a fighter, you have to fight, you know, you spend all your life, your college life and then onwards and just, you know and whereas I think a bloke wouldn't bother but yeah I will and it's goes for every woman I know from there as well, you know I mean that sounds awful I mean in a fun way, or whatever but at the same time you just think, but I see Limerick as being very, you know, wouldn't call it feminine but female

**Marc:** Kind of a female strength almost

**Sharon:** Ah we were the female queens weren't we, go on, yeah (*laugh*) absolutely

Sharon's specific self-identification as a Limerick woman, and her construction of Limerick itself as a strong female place, clearly informs, and is informed by her own individual narrative. Of course, this does not mean that readings of county identity abroad as being more of a male concern are necessarily invalid. However, Sharon's narrative is useful in

demonstrating that a simple male-female divide in terms of county identities should not be assumed, and that county identification is gendered in complex ways.

### **County identity among those of Irish descent**

As previously noted, there is a strand running through the above extracts, whereby it is assumed that someone identifying as Irish will also identify with a particular county. It could be argued that such assumptions factor largely in the recent upsurge in interest in genealogy and establishing a specific, localised 'point of origin' among those of Irish descent, as explored by Catherine Nash.<sup>39</sup> The extent to which this becomes something of a shibboleth for the Irish in England as regards authenticity will be now be examined with regard to second generation Irish migrants.

As I have argued elsewhere, the discourse of Irish authenticity through transnational knowledge whereby knowledge of contemporary Ireland is constructed as a prerequisite for claiming Irishness, acts as both a constraint and a resource for those of Irish descent.<sup>40</sup> It can be argued that county identity fulfils a similar role within this discourse, in that it acts as a form of local knowledge based within Ireland. In this context, the following extract from my interview with Finbarr, a retired Irish migrant living in Milton Keynes, on the subject of second generation Irishness is illuminating:

**Finbarr:** No, there are some families who'd definitely, the children are Irish you know and whereas in our case, they don't consider themselves Irish, but there was a thing that used to bug me years ago when people say 'oh my father is fro- is Irish' and you say 'oh, what

part?' 'oh I don't know' [**Marc**: right] I used to think that was terrible, you know so all our children have been over to summer after summer for twenty years back to [*village name*] you know, so they know the shops, they know some of the people, they know everything

Finbarr expresses his irritation at second generation Irish people who are unaware of the locality in Ireland from which their father originated, comparing this with the familiarity his own children have with his native village. Given that this follows on from a discussion about whether second generation migrants call themselves 'Irish', the implicit argument appears to be that knowledge of the locality one's parents originated from is a prerequisite for claiming Irishness. Therefore, local Irish identifications are often central to perceived authentic diasporic Irish identities. Referring back to Matthew and Liam's tendency to prioritise local identifications on introducing themselves to people "with an Irish element" to them, it is notable that in Finbarr's narrative, he represents his first question to those of Irish descent as establishing their locality. This pattern is also apparent in the narratives of second generation Irish people, as in the example below, taken from my interview with Kate, a London-Irish woman in her forties:

**Marc:** Like, does, in terms of talking to other, whether its other London-Irish people or Irish people over here, does the topic of locality come up very much?

**Kate:** Oh yeah where are you from, where are your parents from, that's the first question really, so yeah and I would say Galway, y'know I would always say Galway, so yeah

**Marc:** It's the first question so it's almost like a password in a way is it?

**Kate:** Yeah it is I guess, because I notice my mum and one of the first things she said to you was where are you from, and even when on this course these people I've met in the last few weeks it's all been about 'and where are your parents from again?' and you know

turning out that one of the guys on the course the older guys is from Galway and knew my dad and he knew my dad's brother, Andy , I went to school with his sister, and different people from different parts of Ireland- oh yeah it's one of the first questions still, definitely yeah [**Marc:** okay] basically I think you're trying to find out do you know someone they know, where's the connection you know let's find the connection yeah

Kate describes the near-inevitability that determining the locality of her Irish origins will arise in conversation and the role this plays in acting as a point of connection between Irish people. It can perhaps be surmised that for second generation Irish people, demonstrating knowledge of Irish localities serves to position them as authentic within a conversation with other Irish people, and has a 'levelling' effect on the conversation, serving as it does to establish mutual Irishness. Thus, second generation Irish people can make a claim on an 'authentic' diasporic Irishness, through the local knowledge that county identity represents. Of course, the 'password' element of this knowledge serves to exclude those who may not possess it – as with other aspects of diasporic Irishness, this serves to simultaneously expand and bound the category 'Irish'.

It is important to note here that I am not making a case for the local superseding the national in terms of diasporic Irishness. Rather, in cases where Irishness is contested, the articulation of local identification may add an extra layer of legitimacy to claims of Irishness. This, of course, has added implications for constructions of a 'diasporic' Irish authenticity: while a diasporic Irishness may not necessarily be a deterritorialised Irishness, it may bypass constructions of Irishness promulgated by the Irish nation-state in favour of identifying with an Irishness rooted in a particular locality.

Of course, to a certain extent, where authenticity among those of Irish descent is predicated on identification with a particular locality in Ireland, this presupposes a narrative of relatively fixed origins, where there is an uncomplicated 'home county' with which to identify. Of course, many of those of Irish descent may have familial links with more than one county. For some of my respondents, identification with a county tended to fluctuate and be based on affinity, as well as 'origins'. As might be expected, multiple allegiances and the liminal nature of 'home' among those of Irish descent in England can lead to contestations of 'authentic' Irish identities. One such area in which contestation occurs is when local Irish identities come into conflict with local English identities. This is most likely to occur in the context of Gaelic Games, where the London Gaelic Football team annually compete with Irish counties in the Connacht Football Championship. As this involves competing against counties such as Galway, Mayo and Leitrim, which have historically made up a high proportion of Irish migrants to London, such matches can occasionally become an Irish version of Norman Tebbit's notorious 'cricket test'. In particular, those with a high degree of involvement with the GAA in London tend to bemoan the propensity of some long-term migrants and those of Irish descent to support the county of origin against London. Sinéad, a second-generation London-Irish woman in her forties, articulates the nature of such contestation:

**Sinéad:** So when Leitrim were playing, I would have supported, definitely would have supported London who's to say that, you know, my children don't play for them, erm my brothers didn't but my-some of my two sisters did, I wasn't ever quite good enough to play for them but my two sisters did and what we do here in London it-you know we shouldn't, I think I was a bit shocked because some of my-some friends of my Dad who are from Leitrim, two particular people, I remember them being on the bank, this is two years ago I think when like Leitrim came over to London



**Marc:** Yeah I was at that game

**Sinéad:** And they shout-they were shouting for Leitrim and yet their children had been born here, played Gaelic football in London, I just couldn't believe it and they still affiliated with our club ... I was really shocked and I just thought, I know they're from Leitrim and I can understand that was difficult but I thought God cause my Dad, he didn't openly shout for Leitrim, he wanted London to win but he didn't-he didn't shout really, he didn't shout for Leitrim, I don't know if he shouted for London but he would have been supporting London because all his energies go into keeping London football going and it can be hard going sometimes but I was shocked by these people and they were shocked by me because I was shouting on the bank for London and they were looking at me, they were really shocked and I thought 'well, God, who'd you expect me to shout for?'

Sinéad's narrative portrays a classic diasporic conflict between assumed allegiances to "where we're from" and "where we're at". This conflict for the second generation Irish has been described as negotiating multiple and contested belongings within the two 'hegemonic domains' of Ireland and England.<sup>41</sup> Previous research, such as that carried out under the auspices of the Irish2Project, has suggested that a popular strategy of negotiating this conflict tends to be through the adoption of urban hybridised identities, such as London-Irish, Birmingham-Irish, Manchester-Irish etc. However, this hybridised identity does not resolve the conflict outlined above. Sinéad's articulation of her London-Irishness, which in her narrative is borne of a long family commitment to developing Irish activities (specifically Gaelic Football) in London, is not here a reaction to being positioned as 'English'. Rather, she outlines her frustration at the assumption that her allegiance ought to be to her father's 'home' county of Leitrim, rather than to London. In the context of Gaelic Games, where both Leitrim and London are represented by 'county teams', this raises questions of what a 'home county' constitutes. Sinéad being frustrated by the assumption that allegiances to Leitrim

should trump allegiances to London would appear to suggest that county identity can act as a discursive restraint on a diasporic London-Irishness: parity of esteem does not exist between Leitrim and London as sites of county-based identification.

This can be seen as another form of transnational, or more specifically *translocal* discourse acting as both a resource and a constraint towards the articulation of a more diasporic Irishness, for which the forms of Irishness within Ireland are not necessarily the major reference point.<sup>42</sup> This applies to collective as well as individual articulations of diasporic Irishness, as a reiteration of the ideological dilemma whereby an emphasis on county identification may be seen as undermining Irish solidarity. As an example, the following extract is taken from the group discussion in Birmingham in the context of the difficulties of promoting a public image for the new ‘Irish Quarter’ in Birmingham that would be recognised and enjoyed by Irish and non-Irish alike:

**Becky:** It started off initially when we were, we had a bit of consultation about public art, and they were throwing up ideas that were like, ‘yeah, yeah, I’ve got a great idea; we’ll have a mini-Rock of Cashel’ (*laughter*) okaay

**Eileen:** Was that your mother? (*laughs*)

**Becky:** No, that wasn’t my Mum; and then it kind of, it just escalated, so everybody that was from every different county said ‘yeah, yeah; we’ll have’ oh give me another example of something,

**Eileen:** A replica of Vinegar Hill in Enniscorthy (*laughs*)

**Becky:** That’s the one; you know, something like that, and they all came up with the ide-, and I was ‘Oh right, okay’, so we had to kind of drag it back and say nobody would identify if they, unless they have Irish roots, and ninety nine percent of the time, if somebody’s got

Irish roots and they saw a Rock of Cashel [**Eileen:** *(laughs)*] they wouldn't have a clue what it was because they might not have been to Cashel

Becky relates an occasion in which on attempting to get a group of Irish people to agree on a piece of public art to represent Irishness in Birmingham, each participant proposed a symbol that was of specific relevance to their own county of origin. She constructs this as a problematic situation, both in terms of these being localised, rather than national representations of Irishness, but also frames it in terms of a representation of Irishness being required that was externally recognisable i.e. recognisable as representing Irishness by those who would not have Irish roots. Therefore, while articulations of translocal identification may contribute to a sense of belonging on an individual basis, they may impede the construction of a coherent and 'authentic' collective identity. Interestingly, when providing examples of local symbols in order to illustrate this anecdote, Becky, whose family history is in Tipperary, mentioned the Rock of Cashel, a Tipperary-based symbol, while Eileen, whose family history is in Wexford suggested Vinegar Hill in Enniscorthy, a Wexford-based symbol. Therefore, even when critiquing overly localised representations of Irishness, local identities reassert themselves: Becky and Eileen's self-positioning as having a specific county with which they explicitly identify allows them to develop a reflexive position on some of the apparent absurdities of translocal identification from a point of rhetorical security. Becky and Eileen's laughter during this anecdote would suggest an awareness of this apparent contradiction, as well as invoking the humorous rivalry associated with the promotion of different counties noted by Liam and Matthew.

## **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, it is worthwhile returning to the image of the Offaly Association float at the 2009 London St. Patrick's Day parade, with which I began this article. Clearly, some element of the way in which the county is displayed is intended in the spirit of humorous rivalry and 'slagging' which pervades county identification abroad. Claiming political leaders as Offaly men in a jocular fashion is a means of proclaiming Offaly's supposed superiority to other counties, and would be recognised as such by the intended audience. This form of playing with county identities is a regular feature of Irish celebration abroad, and is arguably far less prone to co-option and commercialisation than other forms of 'public' Irishness. It also appears to be the case that, on an individual level, drawing on the register of the county allows for more personally 'authentic' articulations of Irishness.

However, what the display also promotes is the notion that to be Irish is to be identified with a specific county, and that even those for whom Irishness is just one, relatively distant strand of their ancestry (such as Barack Obama) can be allocated to a particular county. In a diasporic sense, county identification serves as a form of translocal knowledge, which in common with other transnational discourses, can act as both a constraint and a resource in the articulation of 'authentic' Irish identities. County identity is a means for those of Irish descent to claim belonging to Ireland at a more localised level, whereas performing identification with the county appears as a means of negotiating the differentiating aspect of the 'hegemonic domain' of Ireland. However, much as the persistence of county identity post-migration is constructed as potentially threatening Irish solidarity abroad, the assumption of county allegiance may hamper the articulation of a diasporic Irish identity that expresses the specificity of hybridised experience in English cities.

An investigation of the ‘banal county-ism’ that pervades much of everyday Irish discourse can provide new insights on the contours of Irish identity, both within and outside Ireland. What this article has illustrated is that the persistence of county identities post-migration adds an extra layer of identification among the Irish abroad and in particular highlights the role played by locality in articulating ‘authenticity’. While the ways in which migrants and those of Irish descent identify with the locality in which they now reside have been well documented, identification with localities within Ireland have been either overlooked, or taken as read. I would argue that this is an important dimension of Irish diasporic experience that ought to be taken into account in future analyses of the Irish abroad, particularly in the context of emerging translocal initiatives attempting to engage with the diaspora within Ireland itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilmore, ‘Overseas workers take railway trip of a lifetime’, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Nagle, ‘Everybody is Irish on St. Paddy’s’; Scully, ‘Whose Day Is It Anyway?’

<sup>3</sup> The more usual use of BIFFO is to denote Big Ignorant Fecker From Offaly

<sup>4</sup> See [www.irelandxo.com](http://www.irelandxo.com)

<sup>5</sup> McGonigle, ‘Cork Passport to be proposed’. The ‘People’s Republic website’ is a reference to the locally influential [www.peoplesrepublicofcork.com](http://www.peoplesrepublicofcork.com)

<sup>6</sup> Erickson, ‘The Importance of Authenticity for Self and Society’

<sup>7</sup> For further detail, see Scully, ‘Discourses of authenticity and national identity among the Irish diaspora in England’ and Scully, ‘The tyranny of transnational discourse’.

<sup>8</sup> O’Connor, *Seeing Through Counties*.

<sup>9</sup> Daly, ‘The County in Irish History’, 4.

<sup>10</sup> O’Connor, *Seeing Through Counties*.

<sup>11</sup> Although, as highlighted in Cronin, Duncan & Rouse’s *The GAA: County by County* this was a more organic process than might be assumed, and did not subsequently go unchallenged, with the *Gaelic Athlete* newspaper questioning the appropriateness of the use of counties ‘of varied sizes and most irregular and absurd shapes’.

<sup>12</sup> McNally, ‘An Irishman’s Diary’.

<sup>13</sup> The Local Government Commission for England’s 1992-1995 Structural Review found geographically uneven and not particularly strong levels of county identification, compared to other forms of local/regional identification across England. See also Bond & McCrone, ‘The growth of English regionalism’, Cope, Bailey & Atkinson, ‘Restructuring Local Government in Hampshire’, and Royle, ‘Regions and Identities’.

<sup>14</sup> One of the reasons given by Kilkenny County Council in rejecting a boundary extension proposal by Waterford City Council, was that it would “alter the community, cultural and sporting identity of the area and the County”.

<sup>15</sup> Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.

<sup>16</sup> Gillmor, ‘The County’.

<sup>17</sup> Whelan, *The Bases of Regionalism*.

<sup>18</sup> The association of certain neighbourhoods in London with particular counties has left a cultural legacy of sorts on both sides of the Irish Sea. For example, The Bible Code Sundays’ song, *The Green and Red of Harrow*,

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celebrates the links between Harrow and Mayo. Meanwhile the figure of the 'Dagenham Yanks', referring to transnational migrants between the Ford plants in Cork and Dagenham, still holds a place in Corkonian lore.

<sup>19</sup> Walter, 'Tradition and ethnic interaction', 278.

<sup>20</sup> Dunne, *An Unconsidered People*.

<sup>21</sup> Cowley, *The Men Who Built Britain*, 196.

<sup>22</sup> For a comprehensive history of the Irish County Associations in London and New York, see Nyhan, *Comparing Irish Migrants and County Associations in New York and London*. I am also grateful to Nicole McLennan of London Metropolitan University for sharing some of the preliminary findings from her ongoing research project on London's County Associations.

<sup>23</sup> McLennan, *Irish Connections*.

<sup>24</sup> Harrison, *The Scattering*; McLennan, *Irish Connections*.

<sup>25</sup> Nyhan, *Comparing Irish Migrants...*, 127.

<sup>26</sup> Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora*; Rossiter, *Ireland's Hidden Diaspora*.

<sup>27</sup> Gillmor, 'The County'; O'Connor, *The Multiple Experiences of Migrancy*; Ó Briain, *Tickling the English*.

<sup>28</sup> McConnell, 'Frustrated Oz locals lash out...'; Ryan, 'In the Green Fields of Kilburn'. The singer-songwriter Liam Byrne has recently released a song about contemporary Irish migration to Australia entitled 'County Bondi', whereas the website [www.countybondi.com](http://www.countybondi.com) describes the area as the "new 33<sup>rd</sup> county of Ireland" and sells a range of replica GAA jerseys that reflect this.

<sup>29</sup> Gray, 'Irish Women in London'; Hickman et al., 'The Limitations of Whiteness'; Leonard, 'Performing Identities'; Walter, *Outsiders Inside*.

<sup>30</sup> Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora*, 111.

<sup>31</sup> Kells, 'I'm myself and nobody else', 211.

<sup>32</sup> Trew, 'Reluctant Diasporas of Northern Ireland', 552.

<sup>33</sup> Nyhan, *Comparing Irish Migrants...*, 206.

<sup>34</sup> Kneafsey & Cox, 'Food, gender and Irishness', 12.

<sup>35</sup> McCarthy, 'Enacting Irish identity in Western Australia', 376.

<sup>36</sup> Sala, Dandy & Rapley, 'Real Italians and wogs'.

<sup>37</sup> Harney, 'Building Italian Regional Identity'; Maira, 'Identity Dub'.

<sup>38</sup> James, 'Migration, Racism and Identity Formation', 240.

<sup>39</sup> Nash, *Of Irish descent*.

<sup>40</sup> Scully, 'The tyranny of transnational discourse'.

<sup>41</sup> Hickman et al., 'The limitations of whiteness'.

<sup>42</sup> Scully, 'The tyranny of transnational discourse'.

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