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Whiteness and Diasporic Irishness: Nation, Gender and Class

Bronwen Walter

Whiteness is often detached from the notion of diaspora in the recent flurry of interest in the phenomenon, yet it is a key feature of some of the largest and oldest displacements. This paper explores the specific contexts of white racial belonging and status over two centuries in two main destinations of the Irish diaspora, the USA and Britain. Its major contribution is a tracing of the untold story of 'How the Irish became white in Britain' to parallel and contrast with the much more fully developed narrative in the USA. It argues that, contrary to popular belief, the racialisation of the Irish in England did not fade away at the end of the nineteenth century but became transmuted in new forms which have continued to place the 'white' Irish outside the boundaries of the English nation. These have been strangely ignored by social scientists, who conflate Irishness and working-class identities in England without acknowledging the distinctive contribution of Irish backgrounds to constructions of class difference. Gender locates Irish women and men differently in relation to these class positions, for example allowing mothers to be blamed for the perpetuation of the underclass. Class and gender are also largely unrecognised dimensions of Irish ethnicity in the USA, where the presence of 'poor white' neighbourhoods continues to challenge the iconic story of Irish upward mobility. Irishness thus remains central to the construction of mainstream 'white' identities in both the USA and Britain into the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Irish; Whiteness; 'Poor White'; Diaspora; National Identity

The notion of diaspora brings into a comparative framework populations from a single origin who settle in diverse locations, thereby highlighting the contextual nature of processes of social change. This paper juxtaposes the different social structures in the two largest destinations of Irish migrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and now again in the twenty-first, the USA and Britain, to

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explore constructions of whiteness. As Steve Garner points out: 'The best way to understand whiteness is to think both relationally and comparatively', reminding us that 'Precise meanings derive from national racial regimes' (2007: 1–2).

Particular weight will be given in this paper to exploring the British, and more specifically the English, case. The emphasis on England recognises the central role of national identities in the construction of whiteness, highlighting differences between England, Scotland and Wales which are often conflated in the generalising term 'Britain'. Unlike the USA, where the Irish have been pinpointed as the key group whose white identities were constructed to mark the boundary of the black/white binary in the mid-nineteenth century, this tracing has not been attempted for Britain. Instead their move from the ambivalent status of 'white niggers' or, more unequivocally, 'dark' inhabitants of Victorian inner cities (Curtis 1997; McClintock 1995), to taken-for-granted members of the 'white' majority in post-Second World War Britain, has passed almost entirely unnoticed (Mac an Ghaill 2001). This lack of attention reinforces the invisibility of whiteness as a racialised identity in Britain and strengthens the apparent naturalness of the boundary between 'the white majority' and visibly different 'others'. As Robert Miles (1993: 117) observes:

The previously excluded became included in the context of the signification of the 'new' intruder and *the continuing cultural variation is overlooked* in the course of the reconstruction of the nation as culturally homogenous contra another Other (emphasis added).

In Britain two major groups whose ongoing otherness has slipped out of view in this way are the Irish and the Jews.

The approach presented here aligns with Frances Twine and Charles Gallagher's concept of 'third wave whiteness' studies which 'sees whiteness as a multiplicity of identities that are historically grounded, class specific, politically manipulated and gendered social locations' (2008: 6). In particular it contributes to the study of white privilege as experienced and lived in greatly contrasting ways. However it also returns to a key issue of 'second wave whiteness', that is 'the lack of attention to the way immigrants on the racial margins were whitened' (2008: 12), and attempts to place it within these wider social locations.

Explorations of constructions of whiteness insert a new dimension into current diasporic theorisations. Although the paradigmatic Jewish diaspora has a large white component, and two other 'classical diasporas'—Greek and Armenian—would also be viewed in this way, recent case studies have foregrounded issues of 'race', meaning non-white groups. The shift is illustrated forcefully in Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur's introduction to their authoritative edited volume *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (2003), where only one 'white' example is given, that of post-Communist European states whose populations may experience 'xeno-racism' (Fekete 2001). But there is no mention of the large, long-standing Irish diaspora in an extensive and wide-ranging discussion of the meanings and applications of the term.

Diaspora has been theorized from many diverse points of departure—East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Asian Pacific, Caribbean, South American, Latin American, African and Central European (Braziel and Mannur 2003: 5).

The marginalisation of white groups in the current flurry of interest in diasporas reinforces the notion of a naturalised same, denying both its racialised content and the range of racisms which do not depend on skin colour for their operation. This omission may partly be explained by the academic location of authors such as Braziel and Mannur in the United States, where Irish and Jewish populations are usually deemed to be part of the white mainstream. Indeed there can be active opposition to using the term diaspora to describe their positioning. Embracing a diasporic identity by 'white ethnics' is seen by academics on the left as regressive, part of a backlash against civil rights and affirmative action for African-Americans (Barrett and Roediger 1997: 34). As early as 1994, David Lloyd dismissed the use of the term 'the Irish diaspora' as a ploy to 'jump on the ethnic bandwagon', implying that it has a connotation of victimhood which no longer describes their relationship to the hegemonic centre. However, widening definitions of diaspora in the twenty-first century have begun to shift this debate. Kevin Kenny (2003) presents a carefully argued case for developing a joint diaspora and comparative framework within which to study the 'global Irish'.

A different approach is taken by British-based academics Virinder Kalra, Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk (2005). They connect the downplaying of white populations with 'unspoken racialized assumptions' which mean that 'It is the movements and settlements of people of colour that have attracted so much attention in the literature on diaspora and identity' as substitutes for political engagement with racism (2005: 2). To them, 'The two terms in the phrase "white diaspora", almost seem antithetical' (2005: 105), giving freedom to the powerful to move unrecorded and unchecked. It must also be remembered that the place of the Irish in Britain is not identical to that in the USA. In contrast to Lloyd and Kenny's judgement that the Irish are securely within the mainstream, there is ample evidence that anti-Irish attitudes were still widespread in Britain at the end of the twentieth century and that as a group the Irish did not occupy the privileged centre (Hickman and Walter 1997). Although recent economic and political changes may have transformed exclusion into 'banal cosmopolitanism' for many newer arrivals in England (Nagle 2009: 39), anti-Irish attitudes persist throughout Britain, most starkly in the so-called sectarian divisions of the west of Scotland (Bradley 2006; Walls and Williams 2003). But there are echoing reminders in the heartland of England, revealed in a recent national press report of a court case brought by a stagehand alleging 'racist abuse about his Irish ancestry' by colleagues in a London theatre (Gould 2010).

Contexts of both time and space are thus crucial to an exploration of the constructedness of white identities. In the USA the shift of the Irish as an ethnic group into the white mainstream is undisputed, with the consequence that discrimination against 'poor whites' whose disadvantaged status may be related to

their ethnic origins, now goes largely unidentified. In Britain the conflation of migrancy and blackness on the one hand, and national belonging and whiteness on the other, leaves no space for recognition of the diasporic Irish collectivity. By making clear the ways in which whiteness has become connected with hierarchies of power in different ways in different places, a comparative analysis can also reintroduce other axes of differentiation, including class and gender, which have become submerged in the over-simplified black/white binary.

Historical and Geographical Contingencies of Whiteness

Constructions and Limitations of White Privilege in the USA

Over the last 20 years a number of important contributions have been made to the issue of 'How the Irish became white' in the USA. This was the provocative title of Noel Ignatiev's book published in 1995, though the process it described had been introduced in the earlier works of Richard Williams (1990), David Roediger (1991) and Theodore Allen (1994).¹ A wide range of economic and political arguments was made by these authors to support claims that the Irish moved from a position of 'not-white' or racial indeterminacy in the early nineteenth century to one of assured whiteness by its end.

These path-breaking analyses have been subject to critique by later theorists, including Eric Arneson (2001) and Peter Kolchin (2002). It is not the intention in this paper to review these and subsequent arguments in detail, but a few points not yet fully addressed in the US literature and relevant to a comparative analysis will be highlighted. One of the most striking aspects still missing from these accounts by labour historians is recognition of their gendering (Walter 2001). As Helma Lutz (2010: 1651) points out, gender is not just an 'aspect' but a '*central organising principle* in migration flows and in the organisation of migrants' lives' (original emphasis), which is equally true of diasporas. In using the indices of 'white men's work' and participation in the political process, the arguments about the construction of whiteness in the mid-nineteenth-century USA assume that men's public roles as paid workers and voters are sufficient to account for constructions of the place of 'the Irish'. Yet women outnumbered men in the labour force, as well as in the Irish-born population as a whole, after 1850, and were excluded from voting until 1918. Moreover they were placed very differently in the social hierarchy. As domestic servants their independence was less certain, especially when coupled with their Irish origins. Paid domestic labour could by no means be described as 'white women's work' and indeed the balance of African-American and Irish women shifted over the course of the century so that it reverted to a predominantly black labour slot by the 1920s. A more nuanced examination from the perspective of the ethnic group itself has been made of the ambivalence about lobbying for whiteness amongst Irish-American women represented in nineteenth-century novels, though this did not necessarily reduce their desire for white entitlement (Eagan 2001).

This evidence suggests that, based on established criteria, Irish women were by no means as white as Irish men during the nineteenth century and that their movement across the binary line may have had different routes and different timings. A further pointer to the blurring of black/white boundaries for Irish women rather than men is their participation in larger numbers of mixed-race marriages with African-Caribbean as well as with Chinese partners (Tchen 1996).

According to most analysts, therefore, the shift to whiteness in the USA was completed by the beginning of the twentieth century. By 1900 the Irish had 'achieved rough occupational parity with the native-born' (Kenny 2000: 85). Indeed the 'Famine' Irish are seen as fulfilling the 'American Dream' in overcoming initial disadvantage and achieving the Presidency in 1960 in the face of long-standing anti-Catholic attitudes. It is therefore assumed that the Catholic Irish joined the hegemonic white majority, which already included previous generations of Protestant Irish, and have subsequently benefited from the 'white dividend'. Eithne Luibheid (1997), for example, documents the way Irish-American politicians were able to manipulate the immigration procedures to privilege 1980s Irish 'illegals' in gaining access to legitimating visas.

A further shift is argued to have taken place more recently, in which Irish-American ethnicity might be seen as returning to a distinctive ethnic slot. Diane Negra (2001) argues that Irishness has come to represent the American nation itself. By claiming an ethnic rather than simply 'mainstream white' character, it can occupy a place between the negative positions of white supremacy and stigmatised 'race'. Irish-American ethnicity thus stands in for 'white, normal national culture', retrieving it from anxieties surrounding 'the current fascination for Latino culture and performable, visible ethnicities at large' (2001: 229). Drawing evidence from five new television programmes broadcast in 1998 and 1999, each of which focused on Irish-American characters, Negra argues that this choice provided a purified vision of family and community life, again placing women in a central representational role. Irish-American identities were associated with innocence, a romantic and currently successful homeland and upward mobility from an 'ennobled' working-class origin.

The reassertion of a notion of ethnic whiteness could open up new spaces which would allow class differences to be explored, especially the persistence of disadvantage amongst 'poor whites' of Irish background. Academics have not addressed this issue, apparently continuing to accept the 'white arrival' thesis. John Hartigan (1997) makes a strong case for detaching the homogenised ideology of whiteness from the far more varied outcomes of the racialisation of 'poor white' identities, but does not make the further link with Irish origins. His ethnographic work was carried out in Detroit neighbourhoods where the term 'hillbillies' is 'used by whites to inscribe a classed distinction between themselves and more contemptible whites' (1999: 88). Although he mentions the Irish background of the inhabitants (1999: 148), he connects this stigmatisation simply with social class. A much more explicit link between poverty and Irishness is made in a memoir by Michael Patrick MacDonald (1999), *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie*. In a powerful evocation of South

Boston in the 1980s, he argues that the issue of bussing in the 1970s, which appeared to place the Irish at the defensive frontline of the black/white divide, hid from view the shared positionings and long-standing alliances between African- and Irish-Americans. The unusual clarity of this connection probably reflects the geographical specificity of the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) political milieu in Boston.

Such evidence suggests more points of similarity between the USA and Britain than are usually acknowledged. Instead of a linear movement by the Irish into the WASP hegemony, there is greater diversity than is evident in traditional theorisations and thus multiple routes, including the older patterns of the Protestant Scotch-Irish (Harkins 2004). Overlooking these complexities is partly a consequence of privileging ethnicity over class in US discourses, so that social differences within ethnic groups are unnoticed. In Britain, on the other hand, a class dimension is assumed to take priority, which in turn contributes to the absence of an Irish dimension from analyses of ethnicity and racialisation.

Conflations of Whiteness and National Identity in Britain

Academic interest in constructions of whiteness has been even more recent in Britain and a longer narrative connecting the nineteenth and twentieth centuries remains to be written. One author who has addressed these issues is Alistair Bonnett, whose study of *White Identities* (2000) focuses particularly on the historical and geographical contingencies of whiteness. However the plural title refers to white diversity at a global scale, largely ignoring varieties of white identities within the present-day British nations. Like many commentators, Bonnett uses overt racialisation of the Irish in the nineteenth century as evidence for the shifting boundaries of whiteness. But the Irish disappear from his analysis of change in the twentieth century, suggesting a smooth incorporation into the white English working classes. Bridget Byrne confirms that this is the standard view of the relationship between whiteness and Irishness: 'Indeed, for most people, "the Irish" would not constitute a group who were anything other than unproblematically white, although this has not always been the case' (2006: 22).

Bonnett's analysis of constructions of whiteness in Britain pivots around the changing nature of capitalism. He sees nineteenth-century depictions of racial whiteness as imported to Britain from colonial and settler societies, including the USA, in a diasporic recirculation of representations. These depictions in Britain were fetishised as extraordinary, relating only to the upper echelons of society, the bourgeoisie. Other social classes, especially urban and immigrant sections of the working classes, were positioned as outside, or marginal to, whiteness (Nayak 2009). However, it may be argued that pre-existing racialised images of the Irish from the second half of the nineteenth century facilitated the exclusion of the working classes (Davis 1996). These associations also contributed to the 'othering' of women domestic servants and thus contributed to constructions of white middle-class masculinity in Britain (Walter 2009).

In a chapter entitled 'How the British working class became white', Bonnett dates the process when the working classes began to be included in racialised white identities to the early part of the twentieth century (2000: 28–45). He identifies two related processes. The first was the spread of populist nationalist and imperialist activities which brought imperialism and racial categories 'into ever closer proximity with working-class lives' (2000: 38). The second was imperialism's impact on the social and political restructuring of British capitalism. Bonnett argues that a crisis in economic productivity had to be resolved by improving standards of living for the 'respectable' poor. This led to the rise of the welfare state, initially through subsidised housing provision, followed later by state-provided secondary education and health services. Such economic inclusion was accompanied by more comprehensive national inclusion which, because of earlier constructions linking the imperial British élites with whiteness, now became symbolised by shared whiteness. Thus entitlement to welfare services became interlinked with the racialised notion of 'our people', a racialisation profoundly, though not exclusively, influenced by the colonial encounter outside Europe.

During the course of the twentieth century, whiteness became a badge of ordinariness, in direct contrast its extraordinary status in the nineteenth century when it was restricted to the bourgeois minority. It was now associated with the 'homely' virtues of quietness, tidiness, cleanliness and decency (Webster 1998). Such ties strengthened in the post-World War Two period when landmarks such as the 1944 Education Act and 1948 National Health Act came fully into effect and a boom in public housing construction took place. Thus the 1950s was an important decade for the consolidation of nationally inclusive forms of whiteness, especially in England, which attracted most external immigration. These arguments suggest a much stronger link between national origins and whiteness than is often acknowledged. In the 1950s the emergence of the black/white binary in England is popularly represented as a 'natural' reaction to the cultural strangeness of so-called New Commonwealth immigrants who arrived during the same period. The welfare entitlement argument, by contrast, gives greater weight to the economic background of which this enlarged flow was part. The fact that black migrants were denied equal access to welfare benefits such as housing strengthened a pre-existing association, but a key factor in the construction of the racialised binary was a binding together of 'indigenous' people as white, rather than simply an exclusion of those defined as black.

However, the symbol of whiteness could become detached from its meanings of national inclusion, leaving white migrants in an ambivalent position. Signs of white bodies seemed to place the great majority of Irish people firmly on one side of the binary. But the widespread understanding that whiteness was a code for Englishness simultaneously excluded them. This reading makes sense of the signs 'No blacks, no Irish, no dogs' which are well-remembered by Irish people who arrived in Britain in the 1950s and early 1960s seeking housing (Lennon *et al.* 1988: 142). Such exclusion is a reminder of the much longer history of racialisation in England which has been

erased by the recent regrouping around the black/white divide. As Fiona Williams points out, 'members of the black Commonwealth who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s stepped into a situation heavy with the legacy of racisms' (1996: 16).

The Irish remained strongly differentiated well into the twentieth century. The resurgence of openly racist discourses by political elites in the 1920s and 1930s is charted by R.M. Douglas (2002). Mary Hickman (1998) argues that the construction of the Irish as 'the same' as the white English was a deliberate political decision taken during immigration debates in the 1950s, against considerable resistance. For reasons of expediency, including the desperate need for labour and the practical difficulties of border control arising out of Irish Partition, the 1955 Government Interdepartmental Committee decided to exclude the Irish from restrictions. Evidence that the Committee felt that the English public would need persuasion to accept this line of action is found in the language of the debate. A decision was taken 'to argue boldly along the lines that the population of the whole of Britain is, for historical and geographical reasons, essentially one'. Special status was not granted on the grounds of 'looking white', therefore, but the Irish were forcibly included into the majority 'white race' for economic and political reasons. However, the net effect of their unrestricted entry was to reinforce the black/white divide as a major binary boundary in postwar Britain.

The 1950s is a key decade for unravelling Irish people's relationships with whiteness. The economic changes which the expanding welfare state facilitated also required a labour force to perform the less desirable, lower-paid manual work which the indigenous population was able to reject. This was work traditionally performed by Irish migrants, whose numbers were boosted by severe economic stagnation in Ireland. Culturally many Irish migrants fitted well with the 'homely' representation of whiteness they encountered in England. Migrants arrived as young people and many married quite quickly and settled down to raise children with the approval of the family-centred Catholic Church. But in reality their own working lives were primarily oriented towards facilitating homebuilding for the English population. Thus Irish men constructed the new housing estates and Irish women provided paid domestic work and other caring services in health and education, from which English women had been withdrawn to maintain the domestic ideology of private homes.

The migrant labour slot exposed Irish people as 'not really' part of the 'homely' white population. Their allocation to low-paid work, dual-earning parenthood with 'latchkey' children, and low priority in housing rights, placed many in the twentieth-century version of the category 'undeserving' poor. In the 1950s moral panics about 'problem families', fuelled by social research, signalled that the 'unskilled' working classes remained outside the new apparently inclusive definition of the English nation (Philp and Timms 1957). It is striking that researchers of two classic studies of 'English slums' in the 1950s selected neighbourhoods which were populated by Irish-born people and people of Irish descent, although this was hardly noted in the rationale of the research or in reports of the findings. Betty Spinley's study

The Deprived and the Privileged (1953) focused on an area of Irish migrant settlement close to King's Cross railway station in North London:

The district is notorious in London for vice and delinquency; it is a major prostitution area and is considered by the Probation Service the blackest spot in the city for juvenile delinquency. A large proportion of the inhabitants are Irish; social workers say, 'The Irish land here, and while the respectable soon move away, the ignorant and shiftless stay' (1953: 40).

Immigrant background contributed to poor housing conditions, giving the Irish a low priority in allocations. Yet Spinley selected this population of 'London slum dwellers' emphatically on the basis of social class, asserting at the outset of the study that 'social class is the most important criterion of cultural subgroups in England'. Moreover she reported 'the empirical findings concerning the development of personality in contrasting groups of *English* people' (1953: 134, emphasis added).

The second study, Madeleine Kerr's *The People of Ship Street* (1958), used Spinley's research as a model and observed that, despite the difference in city and region (Liverpool, in north-west England, in this case), 'environmental conditions seem very alike' (1958: 163). Again the fact that she had chosen a neighbourhood with a long history of Irish occupation was mentioned in passing:

Historically most of this group originated in Ireland about two generations ago. In some case Irish ties are still recognized and at times holidays are taken in Ireland. The tie tends to be fostered by the Roman Catholic Church to which the majority of families belong (1958: 4).

But she concluded that:

[A] subculture pattern of the type described in this book does exist within the complex of patterns which constitutes English society. Geoffrey Gorer, in *Exploring English Character*, mentions the lowest 10% of the population with whom he was not in contact and therefore excluded from his analysis. It looks as if the Ship Street people belong to this group (1958: 189).

Both studies constructed Irish immigrants and their descendants as quintessential members of the English 'underclass'. Their overriding concern with social class meant that neither considered the possibility that an Irish background contributed to the racialisation of the 'underclass' as culturally 'other'. Intriguingly Kerr's reference to Geoffrey Gorer's (1955) publication suggests that indeed the underclass itself was not seen as fully English.

Focus on the 'home' as the location of white Englishness moved whiteness from an attribute of middle-class men in the nineteenth century to a much closer association with women. It is not surprising therefore that the culprits identified by social researchers as responsible for dysfunctional families turned out to be women. Spinley and Kerr reserved special condemnation for mothers. Spinley indeed claimed that mothers frightened her more than the delinquent toughs in the youth club: 'These

women are loud, aggressive, obscene and show the usual marked suspicion of strangers' (1953: 23), while the main conclusion in Kerr's damning report was that 'the crippling strength of the tie to the mother' retards intellectual development and leads to 'non-integrated personalities' (1958: 162).

The corollary of an emphasis on mothers as pathological was the absence of Irish men from the frame altogether. Men were also excluded more generally in home-centred definitions of national identity in England. A flood of films and novels about the decline in Northern working-class community in the late 1950s gave expression to anxieties about white masculinity. The broader context for this anxiety was national decline, attributed to the loss of imperial power and the growing Americanisation of cultural life, suggesting that Britain was becoming 'merely one more offshore island' (Webster 1998: 68–9). Women were represented in novels and films as limiting the lives of men, who were therefore seen as entitled to reassert their lost authority, and blamed in sociological analyses for failing their male children.

Processes of construction are never complete. Connections between Irish populations and 'poor white' English neighbourhoods remained unremarked in subsequent decades. Phil Cohen (1997) showed how white labourism continued to reinvent racialised distinctions in order to distance itself from groups which symbolised its own disavowed alienations. He used the example of 1980s 'skinhead' culture in the Docklands of East London, which developed as a response to the loss of traditional white manual work where public masculinities were on display. When the docks closed, this status was removed, leaving only the shell of whiteness, 'the pure narcissism of physical difference', which allowed unemployed young men to imagine themselves to be 'some kind of local ruling class' (1997: 255). Yet the excluded working classes who aligned themselves to white supremacism as skinheads contained an unacknowledged Irish component. Cohen observes in passing that 'much of the impetus for white laborism came from the local Irish population' (1997: 258).

Cohen's mention of the Irish population of the East End of London references the longer history of conflation of 'poor white' and 'Irish' and raises the issue of the persistence of multi-generational white minority-ethnic identities. Gareth Stedman Jones (1989) argues that representations of East End 'cockneys' have 'coloured representations of the nation as a whole' (1989: 279). He places the trope of the 'cockney' at the forefront of 'domesticating and enshrining social difference within a larger framework on national and imperial unity' at the end of the nineteenth century (1989: 300–1). However, although the Irish made up a substantial proportion of the East End working classes at this time, Stedman Jones does not include them unambiguously in this expanded English national population. 'One important historical question which I do not discuss is the extent to which London's Irish and Jewish populations were incorporated within notions of the "cockney" or excluded from them' (1989: 273, footnote). Yet later in the discussion he cites the orderly conduct of the dock strike of 1889 as a key moment in the movement of the 'cockney' from earlier negative representations as a 'cad' and part of the 'dark residuum' to the positively rated, cheerful member of the 'prospective citizenry'. What he does not

mention was that East End dockers were overwhelmingly Irish. Again, therefore, despite an apparent acknowledgement of their ethnic difference, the Irish are subsumed unnoticed into the English working classes. The loss of a separate identity has hardened in subsequent representations of the 'white' East End, contributing to the 'The Invisible Empire' meticulously revealed by Georgie Wemyss (2009) in which 'white "Islanders" and white "East Enders" are constructed as having local (white) histories stretching back many generations, placing them at the top of the hierarchy of belonging' (2009: 137).

There is an ongoing failure to recognise the racialisation of the Irish and their continuing exclusion from national belonging in England. As a consequence they remain simultaneously denied access to ethnically targeted resources, because they are white, whilst often perceived as 'outside' the English nation as far as welfare entitlement is concerned. In the 1990s individual benefits officers in London and Birmingham routinely questioned Irish applicants at greater length and demanded fuller documentation than from English-born clients, even though their legal position is identical (Hickman and Walter 1997: 172–4). Although Irish welfare and community groups make the case that this is racial discrimination on behalf of disadvantaged groups, the impacts are felt by all Irish people. Breda Gray shows how middle-class migrant women in 1990s Britain who attempted to define their Irish identities on their own terms were pathologised for failing to claim the potential invisibility being offered to them through 'looking white' (2002: 267).

However, the issue of white diversity in Britain has received greater attention in the past decade, partly as result of a sustained campaign on the part of Irish community and welfare workers, especially in London (Howard 2006). After much delay, the Commission for Racial Equality was persuaded to fund research for the report *Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain* (Hickman and Walter 1997). This was one of the catalysts for inclusion of an 'Irish' category in the ethnic question of the 2001 Census. In England and Wales people who had ticked simply 'White' in 1991 were invited to select a further sub-category of 'British', 'Irish' or 'Other White' in England and Wales, according to their 'cultural background', which could include people of Irish descent. The Irish population was singled out as the only named non-hegemonic 'White' group, bestowing a minority ethnic status which could then be transferred for the first time to other monitoring situations where the full range of Census options was adopted. A different range of 'White' categories was used in Scotland and Northern Ireland, signalling that 'the cultural heterogeneity of the "host" is now fully exposed' (Crowley and Hickman 2008: 1238). However, Black or mixed-race Irish people could not be counted.

But the novelty of the invitation to claim Irish ethnicity, as well as the wording and placing of the 'White Irish' category in the 2001 Census question, caused misunderstanding and confusion to people of Irish descent. The either/or choice (British or Irish) was wrongly understood to refer to nationality and thus to require a tick in the 'British' box, so that there was a substantial undercounting of people who might otherwise have claimed an Irish cultural background (Hickman 2011; Walter 2005a).

After the Office of National Statistics had initially proposed to remove the Irish category altogether from the 2011 ethnic choices, on the basis that it would fit more appropriately in the new national identity question, it has been re-instated and the White section expanded to include Gypsies/Irish Travellers. A limited notion of white ethnic difference has thus been firmly inserted into British public life, although academic studies and policy reports frequently reject this option and collapse the full census list of ethnic categories back into a single overarching 'White' box (see, for example, Kimber 2010: 31; Stillwell and Hussain 2010: 1383).

The range of recognised ethnicities was also expanded by the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, set up in 1997 by the independent equalities think-tank, the Runnymede Trust. It had the support of the Home Secretary, indicating the intention that its recommendations would constitute a major plank in the 'race relations' strategy of the new Labour Government. The report published in 2000 is remarkable in its strong commitment to the notion of white diversity. Both Irish and Jewish experiences are included throughout the document, both as separate case studies and in discussions of issues affecting minority ethnic groups in Britain (Runnymede Trust 2000, 20–1, 31–3, 59–65), in strong contrast to the standard work on the topic—*Ethnic Minorities in Britain*—where they are rarely mentioned (Modood *et al.* 1997). Although the launch of the report in May 2000 was pre-empted by loud front-page condemnation in the *Daily Telegraph* (10 October 2000) for claiming that Britishness has racist connotations, so that it did not receive the anticipated stamp of official approval, it represents a key text in the British literature on 'race' and ethnicity.

The mutually reinforcing relationship between whiteness and Englishness continues to place a question mark over the connection between 'looking white' and belonging to the white national collectivity. Irish people may be misrecognised as being 'the same' as English people but can still be placed outside white Englishness. Despite significant levels of upward mobility for many, and a changing political landscape as a result of the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, markers of difference may still be imposed or claimed. It continues to surface in unmarked ways in key research on the English working classes in the present day. Diane Reay relates 'Shaun's story: troubling discourses of white, working-class masculinities'. Described as 'an Irish boy', 'living on an inner-city, sink council estate in a lone mother family surviving on state benefits, [who] belongs to a section of the working classes that has routinely been stigmatised within dominant discourses' (2002: 223), Shaun provides a case study of class disadvantage in English education. In their detailed analysis of the Larkman social housing estate in Norwich, chosen to exemplify 'slum' communities in a provincial English city, Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor (2009) open the first chapter with a long quotation from 'Lorna Haley':

I'm sorry in a way because I know that you're quite keen to break down the stereotypes . . . but I do feel, and again this is perhaps another source of my shame, that our family fulfilled absolutely every stereotype you can think of. So . . . my Mum had a drunken Irish Catholic father who everyone called Paddy . . . [her] mother died so the children were taken (2009: 1).

Both the authors and the participant herself agree that the Irish disadvantaged working classes symbolise the 'undeserving poor'. They illustrate Anoop Nayak's argument that groups seen as 'white trash' in Britain are 'defined across a shared discourse of lower working class origins that at moments may become racialized' (2009: 29), suggesting the possibility that an Irish dimension heightens this process. This interpretation appears to question Robert Young's (2008) claim that the idea of English ethnicity, initially forged against Irish others, was reconfigured in the later nineteenth century to become inclusive of the constituent nations of the then British Isles.

At the same time the unresolved issue of the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland continues to resonate for Irish people, even where it has been 'forgotten' by the English. As Hickman (1998) argues, this required 'forcible inclusion' of the Irish in the 1950s, against their own sense of a political identity. Amongst participants in the *Irish 2 Project* on the second-generation Irish in Britain (2000–02, the years of the project), the clearest understanding of the national/racial positioning of the Irish was displayed by the small group of young people of mixed race. This group had the opportunity to compare the identities of their Irish and black parents. Each saw parallels in the ethnic status of these immigrants and agreed that, to them, 'white' signified an English national identity. Tariq, whose Irish mother and Indian father had middle-class occupations, spelled it out most clearly:

I guess for me my mum has never been white in the sense, not that she is not white in colour, but she is not British, she has never been white in any kind of way of identifying herself. For me I had a notion of what the implication was to be white on that form [the 2001 Census], there was almost this 'them' and 'us' feeling about it, 'inside' or 'outside' feeling about it. My mum is Irish; she has the same attitude towards Britishness, more so than I do. English, no way (Walter 2005b: 174).

Tariq said he had written in 'Irish Pakistani' in the Mixed Race 2001 census category. This story is echoed closely by Twine's interview with Taisha, daughter of a 1950s Irish migrant mother and Barbadian father.

Recalling her mother's practices when she was a child, she argued that her mother routinely discussed race and racism with her and thus provided her with a vocabulary for thinking about the political meaning of being black, Irish and British heritage. In her analysis of why she became strongly identified with the African Caribbean community and why she has shifted from self-identifying as 'mixed race' to a 'black' women, Taisha cites the alternative history lessons that her mother provided at home (2004: 885).

It is not by chance that both had Irish mothers. Suzanne Model and Gene Fisher (2002) show that statistically this gendering is most common, related, they argue, to the higher earning power of men which compensates for their lower 'black' status. Since mothers often play a greater role in childcare, this gives their children an in-depth, everyday understanding of different meanings of whiteness.

Whereas in the United States the Irish were at the forefront of the establishment of the rigidity of the black/white binary in the mid-nineteenth century, in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century they are a key group whose experiences may be used to challenge its grip on the hegemonic imagination. With the possibility of diversity amongst white identities starting to be acknowledged, there may be a space to develop a more nuanced understanding of the fluidity of racialised construction. This need not deflect attention from the unresolved issue of the 'colour line', in which Garner (2007: 179) fears scholars may collude. 'Whiteness has two simultaneous borders: one between white and Other and the second separating grades of whiteness. Over-emphasis on the latter is problematic. In zooming in on the distinctions at that end, the overarching frame goes out of focus' (2007: 11). Instead, unpacking white sameness might turn attention to 'deep-seated social divisions and transformations shaping everyday life experiences of *both* long-term settled and new arrivals' (Hickman *et al.* 2008: 87, emphasis added).

Conclusions

Contexts of space and time are crucial to explorations of racialisations, which are constantly in a state of flux however fixed they may appear to be. Even the apparently completed story of 'How the Irish became White' in the USA has been shown to be partial when gender and class are inserted, and to take different routes at different times and in different places. The parallel narrative of 'How the Irish became White in Britain' is complex and contentious. This article has pointed in some directions which may illuminate this account, but has focused on only one part of the British nation, England. Landscapes of whiteness in Scotland, for example, are different, because of different histories of immigration and different religious divisions, but also because the Scots have distanced themselves from 'English' racisms (Smith 1993).

To date academic attention in Britain has been focused on the 'visible' half of the black/white dualism. Meticulous evidence has been presented of the diversity of the black populations. Modood *et al.* have categorised these populations into three groupings, in the form of an internal hierarchy which challenges the label of 'same'. One grouping exceeds the economic status of the total population whilst another occupies an intermediate position and a third fits more closely with the stereotype of disadvantage arising from discrimination (1997: 342–6). However the other half of the binary remains largely unexamined, despite increasing calls for its consideration (Garner 2007; Kalra *et al.* 2005). As an easy shorthand label, white is assumed to be a monolithic grouping which privileges all its members. This denies the experiences of sections of white populations who do not share the full range of attributes which define the most powerful groupings. As this paper has demonstrated, ethnicity, gender and class can all render populations less than fully white.

An area which has been highlighted is the marked reluctance of academics in both the USA and Britain to explore the class implications of whiteness. Reviewing Matt Wray's (2006) book *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*,

Nayak comments that 'the racialization of the poor [has] been given scant regard in the US' (2008: 833). Chris Haylett refers even more strongly to the 'dumping' of the white working class within particular areas of academic writing in Britain (2001: 353). As she observes: 'The "others" which have been accorded such high symbolic status within critical academic theory, for example, are definitely not the white, working class poor. Might they be too ambiguous as victims? Too unfashionably nonexotic? Too white?' (2001: 353). This challenge has been taken up by the Runnymede Trust in their publication *Who Cares about the White Working Class?* (Sveinsson 2009). The editor describes the volume as a 'starting point for further discussion', expressing the hope that 'others will fill in the gaps in order to build a comprehensive picture of the issues we touch on here' (2009: 6). One such gap, alluded to in Nayak's contribution but undeveloped, is diverse ethnic whitenesses which would open up the possibility for exploring further the relationship between whiteness and Irishness.

Each diaspora has its own specificity. The Irish diaspora plays a distinctive role in constructions of whiteness in different global locations because of its long history of racialisation by British colonisers who subsequently became the 'Anglo-Saxon' charter group in the US Republic. In both Britain and the USA, the Irish were categorised as an inferior 'race' in the period before the black/white binary became fixed. The processes of fixing the boundary took different forms in the two locations, though imagery flowed between the two and contributed to the constructions. Because of this colonised and racialised history, which is entangled in the huge outpouring of Irish emigration especially following the Great Famine of the 1840s, a large Irish population has settled in both of these two locations. In the case of the USA the Irish were the largest 'free' workforce recruited at an early stage in the industrialisation process and therefore at the forefront of unionisation and political party formation. In Britain, on the other hand, the Irish played an important part in the continued exclusion of the working classes from bourgeois whiteness, through their contribution to the racialised othering of the working classes as a whole. This article has suggested that the process was not completed during the nineteenth century as most theorists have implied, but continued far longer for the 'underclass' of which sections of the Irish population have continued to be part.

Note

- [1] Interestingly, each of these books by US authors had a British publisher, suggesting that the debate was thought to be of lesser interest in the 'home' country.

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