Exploring the significance of Polish shops within the Irish foodscape
Linda Coakley*

Department of Geography, University College Cork

Since 2004, Polish food has become firmly embedded in the Irish foodscape as Polish shops opened up in cities and towns across Ireland. The aim of this article is to develop an understanding of the significance and meaning of these Polish shops within the Irish foodscape. In order to achieve this I will take a more-than-representational approach focusing on the practices, sensory reactions and material interactions Poles have within these stores and with their food products. The article will draw on ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with Polish migrants to explore their experiences. Attention to these details reveals how Polish shops become meaningful within the Irish foodscape for providing a sense of home to Polish migrants living in Ireland.

Keywords: Polish migrants; food; home; senses; materiality

Introduction

In 2004, ten new countries joined the EU; Ireland was one of only two other countries (Sweden and the UK) to open its labour markets to these new member states. As a result of this, and due also to the then positive economic climate, Ireland witnessed a huge increase in the number of migrants arriving in search of employment (Chiyoko King-O’Riain 2008, Mac Éinrí and White 2008). The largest group of migrants came from Poland and they now account for the second largest group of migrants to Ireland after UK nationals (CSO 2008). According to the CSO (2008) in 2006, there were 63,276 Poles living in Ireland with 4183 Poles living in Cork city and suburbs (CSO 2006). These numbers, however, are often disputed as the Department of Social and Family Affairs (2008) reported that in 2006, 93,787 PPS numbers were issued to Polish nationals. Furthermore, in recent times it has been reported that many Poles have been returning to Poland due to the economic downturn in Ireland, thus it is difficult to know the exact number of Poles currently living in Cork. The large influx of Polish migrants to Ireland impacted significantly on the Irish foodscape with Polish shops appearing around the country. The Polskie sklepy became indicative of the Polish diaspora in Ireland. These shops were not restricted to a particular location or clustered in one area but could be found scattered throughout the city. While conducting fieldwork from 2007 to 2009, I counted up to 15 Polish shops in Cork city. However, due to the economic downturn many of these shops have been closing and during a more recent survey (2010) I counted just seven Polish shops across the city. Despite this decline, the remaining shops still contribute to the Irish foodscape and remain significant places for Poles. They are also important for other Eastern European migrants and, to lesser extent, for other migrants from Western Europe who

*Email: lindacoakley@gmail.com
use the Polish shops to obtain bread, teas and confectionery products. However, the focus of this article is on how these Polish shops become meaningful sites for Polish migrants within the Irish foodscape.

Exploring the foodscape

The word foodscape refers to the landscape of food. According to Yasmeen (2001, p. 95), it is ‘the spatial manifestation of food distribution and eating habits’. As Pannelli and Tipa (2009, p. 456) tell us, the concept of the foodscape is predominantly located in literature concerned with analysing urban areas and their ‘socio-spatial manifestation of human–food activities, foodstuffs and subsequent social or health implications’ (Yasmeen 2001, Cummins and Macintyre 2002, Winson 2004). To a lesser extent it can also be found in cultural research as we see in Jochnowitz (2008) where the word foodscape frames the analysis of how Jews of the former Soviet Union use food to make place in New York. My own understanding and use of the word foodscape is akin to studies of landscape that employ a ‘more-than-representational’ approach (see Lorimer 2005, 2007 and 2008). Such studies focus on how landscape comes into being, or is performed, through an exploration of what people feel and do within the landscape. As Merriman (2006, p. 78) acknowledges, what is important is the ‘ways in which people encounter, move through and inhabit landscapes’. A more-than-representational approach is significant for promoting a more embodied understanding of the landscape. It is a ‘way of understanding meaning as not residing in something but as generated through processes’ (Thrift 2000, p. 225).

Consequently, the approach helps to avoid static conceptualisations of Polish shops as symbols of Polish identity or home, as more-than-representational theory redirects our focus ‘from the posited meaning towards the material compositions and conduct of representations’ (Dewsbury et al. 2002, p. 438). A more-than-representational understanding of the foodscape allows us to appreciate how Polish shops become meaningful for Polish migrants within the context of the Irish foodscape: it places Polish migrants ‘physically and practically’ (Hitchings 2007, p. 365) within the Irish foodscape. Similar to Rose (2002, p. 457), mine ‘is an interest in how the landscape “comes to matter” – how it comes to be relevant through practice’. In order to achieve this objective we must tease out the significance of the active, feeling, sensing, experiencing and doing body within the foodscape. Taking such an approach will help us to capture the sensuous, lived experiences of Poles as they encounter these shops and use their food products. Attention to such details ultimately highlights how these Polish shops become meaningful within the Irish foodscape as affording a sense of home and belonging for Polish migrants.

While traditionally the idea of home was rooted in a physical location such as a house, more contemporary research argues that home is not restricted to residing in a physical location but can be constructed through practice and materials (Miller 2001, Tolia-Kelly 2004, Blunt and Valerly 2004, Blunt and Dowling 2006, Walsh 2006, Botticello 2007, Rabikowska and Burrell 2009). As such, the creation of home becomes a process that can be made and remade. This is an important point when considering the subject of home within the context of migration. The process of migration can often stir feelings of dislocation and up-rootedness when lives become
fragmented as they cross boundaries. However, through certain practices, migrants can give place meaning and a sense of home. As Ahmed et al. (2003, p. 9) argue, migrants can reground themselves through the ‘reclaiming and reprocessing of habits, objects, names and histories that have been uprooted’. Furthermore, according to Blunt and Varley (2004, p. 3), ‘the everyday practices, material cultures and social relations that shape home on a domestic scale resonate far beyond the household’. Thus Polish shops can also become a place of homely feelings through the shopping practices of Poles and their experiences within these shops. There is an undeniable link between home and food as Hage (1997, p. 101) observes, with the label ‘home-made’ often placed on food or ready made meals one might find in the supermarket as it displays ‘intimations of sound nutrition, careful choice of ingredients and careful labour of love’. In the context of migration, food practices thus become a powerful vehicle for producing a sense of home and belonging, a phenomenon noted by Law (2001), Petridou (2001), Warin and Dennis (2005) and Longhurst et al. (2009) amongst others. Its potency for home-making lies in the fact that ‘food is perceived through a combination of the senses, and it can, therefore, evoke the experience of home as a sensory totality’ (Petridou 2001, p. 89). Consequently, shopping, preparing, cooking and eating food are all practices which actively contribute to a sense of home through their performance.

In the following sections I will focus on the interactions of Poles with these shops and the foods they supply. According to Silvey (2004, p. 501), ‘migration is a bodily process, undeniable and corporeally tied to material change embedded in places’. Polish shops, through the familiar sights and sounds and tastes that they offer, can provide a familiar space within a new environment thereby working towards creating a sense of home. As we try to understand the nature of Polish shops within the Irish foodscape and how they become meaningful through their affording a sense of home, I will explore the following themes: the sights and sounds of Polish shops, cooking with Polish brands, continuity in everyday life, memory, and contrasting meanings.

**Methodology**

Over a period of two years, from 2007 to 2009, I employed an ethnographic approach to gain an insight into Polish food culture as it is performed in Cork. Relying on Polish organisations, the Polish mass in Cork city and personal contacts, I used a snowball recruitment technique to establish a network of participants, trying to ensure that they represented a cross section of the Polish community. I conducted 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out either in respondents’ homes or a café. This provided a space for Polish people to reflect on and communicate about their experiences of food in Cork. In addition, there were innumerable informal conversations with Poles about their foodways in Ireland. On numerous occasions, I have been grocery shopping, preparing, cooking and eating food with my participants, which has enabled me to witness firsthand the performance of Polish foodways and how they unfold in Cork. As an Irish researcher who does not speak fluent Polish these interviews and conversations were carried out in English and consequently I acknowledge that those who did not speak any English could not partake in the research. Furthermore, while the level of English amongst my participants was high, I accept that subtleties in
experiences might have been missed or that the use of certain words in English might not have the same meaning in Polish.

The data collected from these ethnographic insights, interviews and conversations was uploaded onto NVIVO 8 (a specialist software package for qualitative analysis) where the data was then analysed and interpreted using ‘a systematic and continuous process of reading, thinking, reflecting, and grouping and regrouping the ideas’ and themes that emerge (O’Sullivan et al. 2008, p. 67). In these instances the spoken word is seen as making ‘visible the unseen personal realms of experience’ (Wiles et al. 2005, p. 90 citing Gubrium and Holstein 1994). According to Pink (2009, p. 86), ‘when research participants use words to describe their experiences, they are placing verbal definitions on sensory embodied experiences’ which can thus provide us with an insight into how Polish shops become meaningful. Names have been changed to protect the identities of the participants.

The sights and sounds of the Polish shops

The initial creation of homely feelings for Polish migrants is triggered by the stimulation of the senses of sight and sound in the Polish shops. In Figure 1 we immediately notice the use of language in marking out these shops as places where Polish food can be purchased. On the windows of two of the shops we can see numerous advertisements, all written in Polish, which offer goods and services ranging from babysitters, hairdressers and apartments for rent, to mechanics and driving instructors. These signs usually represent advertisements by Poles for Poles and immediately convey intimations of community and support. In addition, in two of the photographs we can see the use of the crowned eagle from the Polish coat of arms, while another striking feature of these shops is the strong use of the Polish national colours of red and white. Through language, symbol and colours, we immediately recognise how a sense of Poland can become performed and experienced in a new location. Thus, before we even enter these shops, their appearance makes them stand out against other shops in the foodscape. They transform an Irish space into a recognisably Polish place providing feelings of home, as indicated by one interviewee, Beata, when she told me:

> When I saw for the first time Polish car or Polish shop you feel like you are in your own country.

Moving from the outside into the shop, one enters a new sound world with Polish being spoken and often a radio playing Polish music in the background. Such sounds are important for many migrants. As Gunew (2003, p. 42) highlights ‘languages with their inflections and rhythms, as much as their overt signification, invariably function to remind one of home in palpable ways’. Through my ethnographic fieldwork, I have observed that many Polish migrants, particularly those who work amongst other Poles or stay-at-home mothers, have poor communication skills in English. As a result, I would argue that for many Poles the practice of food shopping in Polish stores where one can communicate in one’s own language provides a sense of ease and comfort. Similarly, the fact that the packaging of products is written in Polish is another important advantage to shopping in the Polish shops. As Marta, who spoke very good English, told me:
When you see different names of the herbs [on sale in the non-Polish shops] you would have to open your dictionary to get the names so it's much easier to walk to the Polish shop to pick up from the shelves the ones you want.

Shopping for herbs in a place other than a Polish shop can thus become a long protracted experience where one has to stop, take out a dictionary and search through it to make sure of purchasing the correct herb. By contrast, the Polish shops allow one to move freely through the shop, picking up what one needs almost without reflection. Overall, for many Poles the sights and sounds of these shops resonate within the body creating homely feelings.

**Cooking with Polish brands**

The purchase of certain Polish branded products is also significant to many Poles. In particular, the significance of certain products becomes heightened after experiences of trying to purchase a similar product in a non-Polish store. Polish branded items are often perceived as tasting better and being better for cooking with. There are several items in particular where a contrast is identified between the Polish brand...
and the ‘Irish’ equivalent. Such items include mayonnaise, mustard, flour, bread, milk and bread crumbs, with the Polish branded item being considered superior. For example, one woman told me how her friend tried to make a familiar cake using ‘Irish’ flour and, despite following the recipe exactly, the cake did not taste right. However, when using flour she obtained from the Polish shop she achieved the correct taste. Similarly, a different woman described making a salad which involves mixing fresh vegetables with cream. She makes a point of telling me that she has purchased this cream in the Polish shop and when I ask her why, she says she once tried to make this salad using the ‘Irish’ cream and it was impossible, due to the runnier consistency of the ‘Irish’ product when compared to the denser Polish śmietana. However it can also be said that on some occasions language again plays a part, as when I purchased a tub of śmietana myself I found it to be similar to sour cream. In this case it can be said that there is a misunderstanding between the signer and the signified after translation.

Whether it is due to linguistic misunderstanding or to perceived differences in taste, in the everyday life of Polish migrants encounters with certain products purchased outside the Polish shop can promote feelings of dislocation given the materiality of those products which are perceived as having different, strange or unusual qualities. Bodies carry with them tastes, smells, and habits which are connected to our socialisation in particular places and times and, thus, as we move from those places our awareness of the distance between the here and now and the then and there become evident through encountering new tastes (Choo 2007). As a result, ‘Irish’ products can be perceived as having a disruptive effect, as they unsettle and upset the familiar rhythm of doing cooking or particular taste expectations. Thus to draw on Edensor (2007, p. 207), we could say that ‘the peculiar feel of space [the Irish foodscape], impresses itself upon the body, provoking sensations and coercing its actions [towards the Polish shops]’. Such was clearly the case for Kinga in this next extract where she tells me of her experience trying to use breadcrumbs from an Irish supermarket to coat pork chops. (See Figure 2.) She says:

Bulka tarta [breadcrumbs], this is what I couldn’t find here because the Irish one is wet and I didn’t like doing the pork chops with it, I hated it, so I am just happy that we have it here, the Polish one, because it’s very dry so it’s actually much better […] it’s just when you are making it, you know you have your fingers stick, when you using the dry one, the Polish one, it’s like a salt or a sand, you just have it and it’s very loose it’s better to do the pork chops in it, in the Polish one, and anyway it’s very tiny so I’m not using too much and there is always a lot that stays that I can put back into the pack, and the Irish one when you open it, you have to use it in the next two days, you can’t leave it closed but the dry one you can keep it open a year it has no expiry.

This extract highlights Kinga’s interaction with the materiality of the ‘Irish’ breadcrumbs. We observe how, through the handling of the ‘Irish’ breadcrumbs, the usually familiar process of coating pork chops becomes annoying as it becomes an uncomfortably wet and sticky process. This is then contrasted with the experience of using the breadcrumbs that she is accustomed to from Poland and which are purchased in the Polish shop in Ireland. The consistency of these Polish breadcrumbs allows for a more pleasant experience in preparing the pork chops and furthermore she can relax in the knowledge that these breadcrumbs will not go stale quickly. From such examples we can see how the Polish shops offer products
that are familiar from Poland. These are the products that the Polish migrants have grown up using, they know how they taste, they know what to do with them, how to use them in cooking and they can expect a certain outcome from their use. The material aesthetic of the Polish food, ‘how it feels, its size, its texture, its colour, how it is used in cooking’ (Roe 2006, p. 467), is therefore crucial to understanding the significance of Polish shops. These products are perceived as possessing the correct material qualities and a sense of continuity is thus afforded. In addition to the material qualities of certain products, there is also the psychological importance of being able to purchase certain brands. The sight of particular Polish brands with their logos and packaging can carry powerful associations with different times, experiences and feelings. Therefore certain brands take on a symbolic significance that can promote the purchase of a Polish brand over an ‘Irish’ brand of the same product.

Continuity in everyday life

The sense of continuity afforded by the Polish shops is particularly important for many Poles living in Ireland as they contain a wide range of familiar products, despite the introduction of Polish food lines in many supermarkets, including Tesco, Dunnes Stores and Supervalu. An interview with one woman and her husband revealed a real sense of need for the Polish shops in order to do cooking. Below is an extract from this interview:

Interviewer: What do you buy in the Polish shops?
Kasia: Beans, goląbkï, pierogi, mleko, Polish cream, szynka, sausage and spices, rybę, kawę, herbatę, you know everything I need.
Interviewer: What do you think is different between Irish and Polish food?
Kasia: You know mąka, flour, is different, kiełbasa, masło, smalec, drożdże.
Interviewer: So it’s important to have the Polish shops?
Kasia: So if I’m cooking I must go to Polish shops.
Interviewer: Do you think it would be difficult if there were no Polish shops?
Kasia: For me it’s very hard, I go to shop and cooking every time it’s different, its cream, its smalec, for me it’s problem.
Dawid: One year problem, second year no problem.

From this extract we get a sense that products in these shops are essential for the interviewee to do cooking. As the mother of a young child she feels the responsibility of having to cook dinner. She works night shifts while her husband works during the day. She tells me she doesn’t enjoy cooking, she finds no pleasure in it, it is just something she does during her busy day where she has to get her son ready for school, cleans the house, prepares dinner and goes to work. She told me how she has no time to herself. As I listened to her I got a sense that the Polish shops provide her with ‘an effective route’ for doing cooking (Felski 1999), a route that is drawn from the embodied knowledge and skills that she had acquired growing up in Poland and which promotes a degree of pragmatism in her busy everyday life. As Rita Felski notes, ‘the contemporary city may constitute a chaotic labyrinth of infinite possibilities, yet in our daily travels we often choose to carve out a familiar path, managing space and time by tracing the same route again and again’ (1999, p. 28). And so, it might be argued, is the case with foodways. In everyday life we choose to follow a familiar path, a certain way of doing cooking, as it affords continuity in everyday life. Just because people move place does not mean that they abandon their familiar habits and ways of doing things. As Felski (2002, p. 615) notes, ‘we could not function in the world without the protective cushion of habit’, and these Polish products allow Poles to draw on their embodied know-how to do cooking.

Memory
While continuity and familiarity are the most present themes in discussions of the Polish shops, it is also important to highlight the inextricable link between food and memory (Sutton 2001). Food, because of its sensuous qualities, is a particularly effective trigger for memory (Lupton 1996). Embedded in the taste, smell, touch or sight of food is a whole world of memories and experiences. In the case of migration, the re-encountering of familiar food within a new context often becomes shot through with the memory of something. Nostalgic sentiments can trigger a ‘bodily recollection’ (Korsmeyer 2005, p. 7) temporarily transporting the migrant back to a more familiar place and time as they consume certain foods. In a quote from my participant Ola we can see how different people, places and times from Poland get mixed together in the sight of a familiar product such as mayonnaise. (See Figure 3.)

I have this sense of relief when I see Polish mayonnaise. I hate Hellmann’s [mayonnaise] so it’s small things you have associations with, like when I see Polish mayo or have it on my table, I can think of days when I was little and my parents would make this potato salad on Saturday and the taste of the mayo gave the flavour to the whole thing.
Drawing on Hetherington’s (2003) concept of *praesentia* we can see how this mayonnaise, purchased in its new setting in Cork, now embodies people, places and times in Poland. Hetherington (2003, p. 1940) uses the concept of *praesentia* to examine what is afforded between the interaction of the subject and object stating that, ‘*praesentia* involves a presence of something absent – something that we cannot behold but which touches us and which we can touch’. In this case, for Ola, the sight of this jar of mayonnaise and its particular taste produces a very special presence of her parents and those times on a Saturday where they would eat potato salad together. Drawing on the concept of *praesentia* we can observe how encounters with Polish products produce a presence of people and places in Poland thereby generating a sense of home as a distant absent becomes present bringing ‘the there here, the then now’ (Della Dora 2009, p. 344). This encounter with *praesentia* can consequently touch and affect Poles in a very personal way.

**Contrasting meanings**

While this article argues that Polish shops become meaningful in various ways, it should be recognised that, for several Poles I encountered, this sense of home was not always positively experienced. The perception of the Polish shops can sometimes be negative, particularly among young single professionals. For example, when I ask how they feel about these shops, they are often rather dismissive, stating how they do not shop there or that they prefer to try and experience new tastes. One man in particular, Adam, was quite negative about the Polish shops stating:

I don’t really think it [Polish shops] is that important, well I buy sometimes things like juices or sweets sometimes, but I wouldn’t buy the precooked frozen pierogi or those
Polish traditional things, I don’t think they are worth it, try something new, different or fresh. I think these shops, sometimes I think of them like propaganda well obviously just because so many people are feeling lost and they need this identification and I suppose they then meet each other in the shops and they can have a chat and they can get useful information if they are not confident in their English and that’s probably helpful, but as I told you before I want to feel abroad and I am more open to new experiences and that’s why I don’t really like the idea of Polish shops.

It appears that this man is resentful of the Polish shops. The food contained within does not positively stimulate his senses; instead, he perceives the food contained within these shops as stale and boring. He rejects the Polish shops as they come to symbolise a lack of desire to interact with one’s surroundings, one’s environment. He wants to feel like he is in a different country thus the visual reminder of Poland pushes him to avoid the Polish shops. Instead he attempts to validate his experience of living abroad through new culinary experiences of something ‘new, fresh or different’. In this extract we observe that although these Polish shops are experienced as providing a sense of home, sometimes familiarity breeds contempt, which can push one in the other direction. This example highlights the contrasting meanings that can emerge from Polish shops. While most Poles are happy to find Polish shops in Cork, enjoying the sense of comfort and stability they provide, others appear to reject the sense of home that they offer. They instead seek out new gustatory experiences on offer in the Irish foodscape, thereby escaping Polish connections through food (see also Rabikowska and Burrell 2009).

Finally, we also notice from the previous dialogue between Kasia and Dawid that the Polish foodscape is a gendered landscape providing different experiences for men and women. For Kasia, Polish shops are of great importance, while for the husband Dawid, who is not doing the cooking, they are not as significant. He claims that he has become used to the Irish food whereas, in reality, it is his wife who is doing the cooking and thus continually providing him with Polish tastes. Furthermore, I have observed that some Polish men living in Ireland on their own tend not to prioritise cooking and are happy to eat something quick and easy by eating out or consuming readymade meals: in this case food is performing an entirely functional role. Consequently the strength of homely feelings afforded by the Polish shops sometimes varies between men and women. The meaning of Polish shops is thus not fixed and is continually shifting in significance depending on the subjective needs of the individual.

Conclusion

Overall, there are significant transformations occurring within the Irish foodscape today. One such change is the increasing presence of other food cultures due to the diverse nationalities that now reside in Ireland. The aim of this article was to focus on Polish shops within the Irish foodscape, providing an understanding of how they become significant as a means of creating a sense of home. The use of a more-than-representational approach draws our attention to people’s embodied experience of the landscape, and underlines the value of contemporary discussions around the meaning of ‘home’. By focusing on the process whereby Poles frequent Polish shops, buy, then prepare and eat Polish foods, we can better understand how these shops become meaningful through a series of sensory and material interactions.
Such interactions are ‘generators of affect’ (McKay 2005, p. 77) which, in turn, determines how they become meaningful. Migration brings with it new and different material geographies in relation to food and as Poles learn to navigate the Irish foodscape they encounter a range of different products and brands that have an impact on their everyday lives. As we have seen, through the sights and sounds of the Polish shops, but also through the materiality and tastes of their products, such shops can offer a feeling of familiarity, continuity in everyday life and memories that ultimately stimulate feelings of home for Polish migrants living in Ireland.

These findings are in line with those of Rabikowska and Burrell (2009) who reveal the role of material culture and consumption in rooting the lives of Polish migrants in the UK. Their work also concludes that Polish shops can be an important fixture in the lives of Polish migrants, as through these shops and the consumption of their products there is ‘the possibility of finding an element of home away from Poland’ (Rabikowska and Burrell 2009, p. 230). Finally, I would like to acknowledge that while these Polish shops are of great importance to migrants living in Ireland it is only half the story. Polish foodways in Ireland are not just about ‘holding on’ but also ‘going further’ (Crouch 2003) as many Poles try new tastes and incorporate them into their daily food habits. The focus of this paper, however, was to highlight specifically how Polish shops become meaningful within the Irish foodscape, which we have seen is achieved by offering the sights, sounds and tastes of home.

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Notes

1. The total population for Cork city and suburbs according to the CSO (2006) is 187,249.
2. A Personal Public Service Number (PPS) is a personal reference number needed to gain employment and access to social welfare benefits, public services and information in Ireland.
3. Translation: goląbki – cabbage rolls stuffed with a mixture of mince beef or pork, onion, and rice or barley baked in a tomato sauce. Pierogi – boiled dumplings which can have a variety of fillings such as meat, cheese, fruit or mushrooms. mleko – milk, szynka – ham, rybę – fish, kawę – coffee, herbatę – tea, maka – flour, kiełbasa – sausage, masło – butter, smalec – lard, drożdże – yeast.

References


