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‘This is special humour’: visual narratives of Polish masculinities in London’s building sites

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**'THIS IS SPECIAL HUMOUR': VISUAL NARRATIVES OF POLISH
MASCULINITIES IN LONDON'S BUILDING SITES**

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**‘THIS IS SPECIAL HUMOUR’: VISUAL NARRATIVES OF POLISH
MASCULINITIES IN LONDON’S BUILDING SITES**



Figure 1: Ryszard’s picture, taken to illustrate workplace cultures.

It was a joke, a kind of joke. Ah – ah well I was speaking, you know, just let – let’s at least say something about, you know, builders – building, in building sites, so – Well, yeah he [English colleague] did it [held poster] so I took a picture of him. ... Yeah, sexy old British singer, yeah, I don’t know who he [sic] is but, I – I thought it was, er, *Daily Sport*, you know this paper, *Daily – Daily Sport* – it’s got nothing to do with sport you know... So that – that’s something which is quite common in building sites these things. (Ryszard, interviewed in English)

Ryszard’s photograph and narrative represents the building site as a masculine space where particular versions of normative and heterosexual masculinities are practiced by builders. Such perceptions of builders and building sites are common in the UK where a large majority of white working-class men are employed and who within this confined space can engage in varieties of gender performances that would under other circumstances be considered

sexist and derogatory to women. These performances include pin-ups of nude women, sexist jokes, sexual boasting, sports-talk, as well as teasing and cat-calls to women who come near or pass by building sites. Yet, Ryszard's narrative hides another perception of this 'white masculine' space – a perception that is becoming increasingly apparent after 2004 with the visibility of a large minority of Polish migrants like Ryszard within building sites. As a photograph taken at my request to illustrate his 'life in London', it is his critique of the aggressive and normative masculinities practised by his English colleagues on site – practices which Ryszard often feels uncomfortable with.

Ryszard's visual narrative of the building site highlights many issues. Firstly that the building site is not just a place of manual labour, it is also a place of social interactions between different men. Secondly, in the aftermath of EU expansion, new Polish migrants who interact with the 'home' population and with each other on building sites are articulating new gender identities based on differences in gender performances. Traditionally seen as the workplace of the 'white working-class' (including Irish, Turkish Cypriot, and Australian migrants), the insertion of Polish migrants in these places has further fractured its 'whiteness' with perceptions of ethno-national 'otherness'. Thus building sites as places where the production process since 2004 has been to a large extent driven by migrant labour from Eastern Europe, have through the social relationships between these diverse actors, also become sites of social constructions of Polish masculinities.

In this chapter, I engage with these issues to suggest how social interactions on building sites shape the construction of Polish masculinities. I do this through visual narratives – a combination of participant photographs and semi-structured interviews, which illustrate how Polish builders reshape new spaces and identities to construct 'others' on building sites. I will focus particularly on social interactions on small building sites to examine how gendered performances of humour, teasing, and socialising among different workers contribute to the

wider construction of Polish masculinities and their differentiations with other ‘white’ builders in London.

POLISH MASCULINITIES?

Recent scholarship on masculinities in the West has suggested that masculinity is one of the many social and political constructions that shape gender relationships within particular contexts. There is no singular form of masculinity – rather there are multiple masculinities, each of which is geographically and temporally specific. As Berg and Longhurst (2003) suggest, masculinities are ‘highly contingent, unstable, contested spaces within gender relations’ which make them crucial to the production and transformation of identities. Masculine identities are shaped in different material contexts under different conditions of gender relationships, spatial practices, and bodily performances. The location and materiality of the body (incorporating its representational, discursive, and performative aspects) is crucial to how masculinity is experienced, read, and constructed (Nast and Pile 1998). This is particularly significant in building work where employment is a performance undertaken by embodied, gendered, and sexed individuals – work which is mainly done by able-bodied and physically strong men. Furthermore, and of crucial importance for this chapter, masculinities are understood to be produced from their mutually constitutive relationships with other identities of class, race, nationality, and ethnicity that operate in different places.

Masculinities have been well-researched in the West within the geographies of work – largely focussing on white working-class unemployment in the aftermath of Fordist manufacturing. In the UK, this has been marked by a ‘crisis of masculinity’ (McDowell, 2003) in which the taken-for granted associations between manliness and manual work were affected by men’s anxieties about loss of employment. Yet, despite the increasing visibility of East- and East-Central European men in building sites in the West, research on Polish or East-European masculinities in these contexts have been largely overlooked within this literature. Much of the

work on gender identities in Eastern Europe has been around the politics of gender and class after transition into ‘post-socialist’ States (Einhorn 2006; Gal and Kligman 2000; Heinen 1997; Kligman 1996; Smith et. al. 2008; Watson 2000). This literature has articulated the politics of gendered empowerment among women in Poland but do not pay specific attention to the construction of masculinities (except for Watson 1993). Only a handful of studies have very recently focussed on Polish migrants in the UK (Eade et. al. 2006; Jordan 2002; Spencer et. al. 2007), examining the construction of class identities and social networks among Poles. While this range of literature on geographies of work and on post-socialism provide important scholarship on the transformation of gender identities, none of them have paid specific attention to the ways that Polish men’s bodily practices and performances during manual work shape ideas of gender differences and masculinities.

Masculine identities and gender relationships as they take shape among Polish male migrants in the UK today are connected to their wider socio-political, historical, and geographic contexts – the socialist State, the Polish republic, and the UK labour market. The socialist State in Poland had offered very few versions of masculinity – emphasising the importance of the Polish family with men as breadwinners and head of households, while simultaneously usurping men’s patriarchal authority over this family (Watson 1993). Socialism however, produced ‘workers’ of the State – labels that were written on both male and female bodies, but which also created a ‘factory world’ (Kenny 1999, 406) that was primarily masculine and largely available to men. Men as physically strong workers and loyal party members were provided self-identification with economically productive roles. Biological differences between male and female bodies were seen as justifications of their differing gender roles within the workplace (Fidelis 2004), with sex-specific legislations that sought to ‘protect’ women from heavy manual work in ‘masculine’ industries of construction, factories, and shipbuilding. Yet within this factory world, there existed a variety of support structures. Under

socialism, trade unions and workplaces were responsible for social provisions at work – toilets, changing rooms, childcare, pubs, and restaurants. This allowed workers to get changed after work and to socialise in pubs and restaurants. Particularly for men, pubs and restaurants became not simply a place of leisure but also a place where they could exchange news and provide support during difficult times. These places have continued to remain significant as support structures during unemployment in post-socialist Poland. Thus, although gender roles were largely defined on the basis of men's and women's differing relationships to labour with the male working body becoming central to masculinity, places of manual work during socialism and after, have always been more than just 'workplaces' – they were also places of support and of social interactions.

Transition from State socialism in 1989, was seen as creating opportunities to enact traditional masculine roles by men that would provide them with more participation and control over both public and private spheres – a role that had been largely erased by the socialist State. In the aftermath of State socialism, Watson notes that 'it is the rise of masculinism that is the primary characteristic of gender relations in Eastern Europe today' (Watson 2000, 71). This is evident in the simultaneous political empowerment of men and exclusion of women, justified through essentialised gender differences. The new civil society has produced 'sharp ruptures with the past – not only in practices, but also in representations' (Gal and Kligman 2000, 83) of masculinity through subjectivity, sense of self, and the body – the aggressive, market-driven, and competitive male body providing new representations of masculinity in postsocialist Poland. While there used to be fundamental tensions between the socialist State and men's empowerment, in the newly formed Polish republic the main point of reference has become the Polish nation with men as its main drivers. Manual work however, has had an increased impact on the lives of men – with the downsizing of state-owned heavy industries, particularly manufacturing and construction, leading to a rise in unemployment among men in these sectors

(Kligman 1996).¹ Further, unemployment has largely affected the lower and upper end of the age spectrum, being persistently high among young people and among older workers above 50 years (Smith et. al., 2008). Under such conditions, households have found a variety of coping strategies with labour migration to the West seen as a regular option. Indeed, as Iglicka (2001, 6) notes, since the 1990s, emigration from Poland has ‘slowly become the domain of blue-collar workers unable to adapt to market requirements’.

The transition from State socialism to capitalism to EU citizenship has meant transformations in power relationships and new forms of identity politics around nationhood and gender. This is particularly evident among those men who move to the UK, where they are confronted with new socio-cultural structures embedded within public and private realms of home, workplace and the city. After the new Polish migrants arrive in London, their ideas of masculinity, nationhood, work and sense of self are continually reshaped in their new social, political, economic, and spatial contexts. As I noted elsewhere (Datta 2008a), earlier perceptions of difference get translated and transformed under these contexts as new attitudes towards others are formed in new places, under different structures of power. Under such conditions, masculinities among Polish male migrants in the UK are constructed in opposition to ‘others’ who they interact with in different places – often through discourses of gendered nationality and gendered ethnicity (Datta, 2008b).

RESEARCHING POLISH MIGRANT MEN IN LONDON

This research is part of a wider project exploring East- and East-Central European construction workers’ experiences of home, work, and migration in London in the aftermath of the EU expansion in 2004. The project used a qualitative methodology of visual narratives – a combination of semi-structured interviewing and participant photographs. There were two stages in this – an initial information gathering interview with participants after which they were provided with a disposable camera to take pictures of their ‘life in London’. In the second

interview, their photographs were used to solicit the contexts and meanings of their experiences.

From 2006-2007, 20 Polish men were interviewed in English and Polish. For the Polish language interview, I made use of an onsite Polish translator who translated and transcribed these interviews into English. The interviews were conducted after work or at weekends, sometimes in participants' houses, in the Polish community centre, coffee shops or pubs. These participants were young – between 24-47 years with only two above 40 years. They had all arrived in the UK as economic migrants between 1996 and 2006. Those who came to the UK before 2004 had arrived as students or tourists and worked illegally until the EU expansion. Although most of them are single in the UK, virtually all of them lived with their parents or partners (and children) before they arrived in London, whom they visit regularly. For some older participants, relationships with their partners broke down soon after they moved to UK, and in a few cases new relationships have formed in the UK. Only two of them had worked in building sites before but most of them had been engaged in some kind of blue-collar work in factories in Poland. Most participants therefore had begun their employment in London on building sites as labourers and progressed to more skilled trades over time. The labour shortages that existed in the construction sector helped to provide them with steady employment which was also seen as better than other sectors such as agriculture, fishing, cleaning, or hotels and catering. Almost all of the participants worked in the home refurbishment sector, where they were part of a group of four to 10 builders, usually renovating houses in London's affluent and up-and-coming neighbourhoods. Their employers were usually small-time contractors – often English but also of other minority white populations such as Turkish Cypriots, Iranians or Australians. Most of them had been hired through word-of-mouth so it was not surprising that participants usually knew each other on building sites.

At a time when the ‘Polish builder’ has become a much debated subject in the UK, participants actively used their photographs to provide narratives of difference on building sites – primarily in relation to English workers. This meant that a large number of these pictures were taken of building sites and of themselves working there. Their photographs drew upon ideas of nationality and gender differences, which are evident in the ways that bodies and spaces were narrated in the interviews. This was also often extended to me as an Asian woman researcher – participants were gentle and chivalrous, opening doors, apologising for occasional swearing, and insisting on paying for my drinks. At the same time, some would express surprise at my ownership over the research, asking my Polish translator whether I really was her ‘boss’. Thus age, gender, ethnicity, race and language played to a large extent into our research relationships and clearly reflected participants’ self-positioning within these contexts – an aspect that is also borne out in their visual narratives.

Yet, although race was a common theme around living experiences in London, work experiences were primarily constructed around gender and ethno-nationality. Participants’ discussions of ‘English’ builders referred largely to the white ‘home’ population which included second generation Irish and Turkish Cypriot workers. ‘Polishness’ on the other hand referred to an ethno-national territory, whose subjects shared a particular moment in history – arriving in the UK after or just before 2004. The visual narratives of participants therefore should be seen as reflecting such wider constructions of nationality, ethnicity, and gender that are set in particular historical and political contexts.

POLISH BUILDERS IN LONDON

The construction industry in London employs approximately 230,000 people (including manual, professional, and administrative occupations), which constitutes 5% of its labour force (HPSC, 2005). Manual workers (including carpenters & joiners, bricklayers, painters & decorators) represent 73% of this total². The current construction workforce is male (91%) and

white³ (87%) (HPSC 2005). A recent research report (IFF 2005) suggests that approximately 30% of construction workers in London are from outside the UK, while minorities such as Irish, Scottish and Welsh make up a high proportion of the white workers. During 2004-2005, the largest official numbers of non-UK entrants in the construction sector have been Polish (13,115) (Home Office 2007). These numbers exclude those who work as self-employed – a common phenomenon in the construction sector, and with various challenges to the accuracy of these official numbers (see Currie 2006 for elaboration), it is expected that Polish workers comprise a large minority of white manual workers in the construction sector.

From 2005 until very recently, increasing house prices and reducing affordability in London had transformed the housing refurbishment sector into an important part of the construction industry, amounting to £4.88 billion in 2005 – a share of 46% of the construction sector output and 3% of the total UK economy (HPSC 2005). Since 2004, East- and East-central European workers have become increasingly visible within construction – those who were employed illegally before 2004 have now taken on more skilled and entrepreneurial work, and those coming fresh into the sector have largely entered as low-paid labourers. This has been possible due to the highly casualised and temporary nature of construction work – employment is usually word-of-mouth, and payment is cash-in-hand. The fast turnover of home refurbishment projects however, requires a steady supply of cheap labour which the new Polish migrants have been able to provide. Their employment has largely been through their Polish social networks, which means that making and maintaining social networks in order to be employed on building sites becomes crucial for those without English language skills. Equally for those who have acquired English skills, making and maintaining new kinds of social networks through their English colleagues becomes crucial to find new and better sources of employment.

Studies on construction workers (Applebaum 1981; Paap 2006; Freeman 1983) have highlighted the ways that social interactions during building work produces particular bodily performances – horse-play, physical jousting, bellicosity, as well as practices of sports talk, sexual boasting, pin-ups of nude women, and cat-calls. Freeman (1993, 725) contends that this ‘hardhat’ image of construction workers becomes a ‘magical object, conferring masculinity on its wearer’ and allows male bonding. Scholarship on manual work such as in the case of dock workers (Gregory 2006) has often identified these practices and performances as making demanding labour more bearable. This range of literature clearly suggest that workplaces of manual labour are more than just places of work – they form key sites of social interactions among manual workers. This is becomes even more relevant in the case of home-refurbishment projects in the UK, where most employers do not provide social amenities such as toilets and washrooms, but expect workers to use the toilets within the homes that they refurbish – practices that often make builders more comfortable in each others bodily presence. Further, the particular geographies of the building sites as enclosed spaces cut-off from the rest of the city encourage particular forms of socialisation among male workers that would be considered inappropriate under other circumstances.

As Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994, 37-8) argue, ‘Not only ‘being a male’, but ‘being male’ can be interpreted differently in different circumstances’. The building site therefore is a particular place of male bonding and masculine performances that have till very recently been conceptualised as a place of white working-class masculinity. In fact although ‘whiteness’ on construction sites have always been read as ‘Englishness’, white workers in the British building industry have always included a significant minority of Irish migrants since the 19th century (Clarke 1992). Yet, often their common language and assumed cultural similarities are taken to represent an assimilated white ‘English’ population – indeed this is a cultural construct which much of the Polish participants often align themselves with. Thus while the politics of

Englishness and whiteness are already complex on building sites, the visibility of a large number of Polish men within its spaces after 2004 adds a further complexity to the masculine performances of builders. Polish masculinities under such contexts take shape not just around the exclusion of women from these spaces, but also around discursive constructions of Englishness and Polishness, old and young, masculinity and femininity within building sites. While ‘whiteness’ is seen as sufficient cultural capital by Polish migrants to find employment (Eade et. al. 2006) the discursive construction of a sophisticated and gentle Polish worker in opposition to English workers also distinguishes themselves from the ‘home’ population and provide counter-narratives of their perceived marginalities on building sites (Datta and Brickell, 2009).

Polish masculinities as they take shape in London’s workplaces are reflective of the wider historical construction of gender under socialism and its translation within more market-driven capitalist economies in Poland and UK. The building site for the Polish men forms both a nodal point of concrete social relations and a conceptual or discursive space of gendered ethno-national identification in which more nuanced and in-depth insights into gendered differences are constructed and shaped. Social interactions reflect their location within the wider geographies of the city – as low-paid migrant men often without sufficient language skills. These are places where they are able to accumulate sufficient social and cultural capital to get access to employment and basic services in London. These places also form sites of social support for new Polish migrants, and provide varieties of knowledge to access and maintain links with Poland. Thus although social interactions on building sites have been conceived as processes of ‘stress-relief’ and ‘male bonding’ in earlier literature, the visual narratives of the Polish participants suggest that they incorporate a much wider range of processes that shape the social construction of masculinities among Polish migrant men in London. Such constructions refer to the varieties and forms of differences encountered in the

workplace, and the ways that these provide the contexts and coordinates for more nuanced understandings of gendered bodies and their spaces.

VISUAL NARRATIVES OF POLISH BUILDERS IN LONDON

Working on home refurbishment projects is different from that of other construction and building projects. Firstly, this work can be completed in a shorter period of time and involves a smaller number of workers, which increases the amount of interactions between them to complete the project. The manual nature of this work means that workers take frequent breaks during the day, which allows them to interact in ways that are not always related to work. Secondly, the small-scale nature of this work means that most workers are hired through social networks and word-of-mouth recommendations. Under such circumstances, most participants knew each other, indeed some of them had been neighbours or friends back in Poland. They had found employment through each other, some were sharing accommodation in London, and most of them also socialised outside the workplace. Their familiarity with each other played a key role in shaping social interactions on building sites in ways that often created divisions between Polish and non-Polish workers. This was related partly to participants' lack of 'cultural capital' in the form of English language skills which produced distinct patterns of socialising and interaction – between Polish and English and between Polish and Polish. Such interactions were also based upon different perceptions of bodies and gender performances – while most Polish participants would engage in sexual jokes and humour, they would simultaneously express discomfort with jokes from their English counterparts. The production of 'others' was then mobilised through perceived ethno-national differences produced from particular interactions of socialising, humour, and teasing, which were then mapped onto their bodies and spaces.

Changing clothes

For most of the participants, differences between them and other builders began with how their bodies were seen and read. Building work was physically strenuous, and the requirements of bodily versatility to do different kinds of work were felt very strongly among the participants. Yet, building work was also more than that – it was messy – especially in the home refurbishment sector, where participants would be painting, tiling or plastering all day, which would mark their bodies and clothes. The ‘typical’ builder’s body – wearing thick clothes, marked with paint and grease, and carrying tools on public transport is a common image of builders in London – was a practice which most participants did not find desirable. Often participants, especially those who were more recent migrants to London, would change into working clothes in the morning and change back into everyday clothes before they left the building site in the evening.



Figure 2: Jan’s picture of a colleague on site.

Well, I usually get changed at work, because if we have some sort of flat or refurbishment, then you can easily get changed, and sometimes after work, instead of going straight home, as I said, I would go to downtown, to have a look at the shops, eat something, so not really in dirty clothes...In Poland still, there is this kind of habit to

always change at work, there was no such thing as someone dirty going on a bus because he is going to work, you will not find that in Poland. Here, I noticed that there is a lot of people commuting [not changed], but I still have this habit from working in Poland ...so I usually commute [dressed] normally. (Jan, translated from Polish)

Other participants suggested that changing on site was 'a very Polish thing' – indeed they reinforced that the Polish working body cannot be identified outside the workplace. These accounts reflect certain cultural differences between the working body in Poland and England – where the former is not visible within urban space. Working in the home refurbishment sector, Jan noted, provided them with the opportunities and places where they could change between work and everyday clothes – the toilets in these homes allowing them the privacy to continue this practice. As we shall see next, such places within their building sites became important not just in the way that they allowed these cultural practices to be sustained, but also produced new forms of interactions between Polish men.

Teasing and Socialising

Studies on shop floor culture describe interactions between workers as 'aggressive, sexist and derogatory, humorous yet insulting, playful but degrading' (Collinson and Hearn 1996, 68). These range from teasing and physical jousting to opening the door while changing and hiding tools and clothes. As Freeman (1993, 731) suggests, the peculiar social geography of urban building sites promotes shared masculine activities that provide 'a way to glue together a work force in an endless process of recombination'. In such interactions the toilet remained a regular site of such activities (Applebaum 1981).



Figure 3: Michal's picture of his colleague in the toilet

Participants often indulged in similar crude teasing but only with other Polish workers. A particular feature of this teasing was the way that this was situated in the toilets of the homes they refurbished – places where they also changed into work clothes. This ‘playfulness’ is illustrated in Michal's photograph of his friend changing in the toilet when he had suddenly opened the door. Michal explained that there was always a convivial atmosphere among them in the building sites where this kind of teasing was taken light-heartedly and assured that his friend had not been offended. Although they were also housemates, Michal refrained from such behaviour at home. Further Michal clarified that this kind of teasing only occurred between Polish workers – he could not imagine interacting with English workers in this way. The sense of enclosure provided by the building site, which promotes such exchanges between Polish men then, served in bringing them simultaneously closer together and further away from non-Polish workers.

These separations were due partly to a lack of English language skills among new Polish migrants, but also due to the fact that these men formed an intricate social support

structure that allowed them not just to keep in touch with news and events in Poland, but also to create new social networks. These networks were important since they could lead to employment or accommodation or even friendships. Conversations were usually in Polish in order to keep their discussions private from their non-Polish supervisors. These conversations were an important source of support for many of those who had arrived in London recently, but they were also different across age-groups.

Because there are mostly older people there, I am the youngest one, there are usually people over thirty, for example they still talk about what is going on in Poland, how their kids are doing, because they have kids in general, you know [pause] well how they help him, if they send them money, how they send it, the best ways to send it, the least commissions, the quickest ways, these sort of subjects. (Jan, translated from Polish)

Jan notes that these subjects, while common among older Polish builders were not ones that he usually engaged with. For younger single participants, coming to the UK provided him for the first time with opportunities to leave home and be more independent. Jan and his friends therefore were more engaged with a different aspect of life in London – discussing differences between women's bodies.

And about [discussing] women rather it is about the ones that pass by, 'oh, this one is very pretty' for example. Why she is pretty, what we like for example about the Indian ones, Japanese and black ones, in what ways they are different to Polish ones, because obviously, you pick on what is different from Polish women. (Jan, translated from Polish)

The particular work cultures that enable these varieties of discussions combine with the physical geographies of these building sites that bring together Polish men in one place and produce specific kinds of social interaction and masculine performances. Significantly, they also reflect the construction of masculinities through men's specific locations within gender

relations in their families. The older men who have partners and perhaps children relate to their gendered roles as breadwinners and patriarchal figures within the household, while the younger men who are single and have for the first time left their parental home in Poland reflect more ‘laddish masculinities’ (McDowell, 2002). While the former reflects gender roles that are intent on sustaining transnational links between Poland and England to situate themselves within a Polish family, the latter uses precisely the absence of their responsibility towards a Polish family to engage with a variety of youthful masculine behaviours.

Although Jan and many like him without English skills were limited in their interactions with other non-Polish builders, there were those who had sufficient language skills to cultivate acquaintances with English builders. This formed a way to tap into a different kind of social capital which the English workers were seen to belong to. Going out for drinks after work was a common way to accumulate this capital, but it was during these moments that differences between them became apparent to the participants.



Figure 4: Karol's picture of drinking beer.

I'll give you a difference between drinking with a Polish man or Polish girl and drinking with English people. It's like, when you live with Polish, at some point you would go, on a little bit heavier things to talk about. ... you know, more about your

problems, maybe, maybe your feelings, maybe, you know, some things and people can help you. That's why we drink. We like drinking and socialising and have fun. It's forbidden in Britain. It is forbidden because I have, innocently have done it few times, being Polish still and you know, I said something that wasn't funny. The silence came on, few minutes of silence, and then someone cracked a joke, turning what I said into a joke and everything was good again. And I find it quite, quite a difficult sociological issue within Londoners. (Karol, interviewed in English)

Karol describes the moment when differences between English and Polish ways of socialising are experienced. While teasing and conversations can be interpreted as part of the wider language skills that keep workers of different nationalities separated, Karol's experiences of socialising suggests how differences are constructed between male builders through drinking. For Karol, drinking with Polish men allows him to discuss the more personal aspects of his life – aspects that might not always be 'funny'. This became particularly significant when he was going through a divorce, and wanted to discuss this with friends. What he describes as a 'sociological' issue among Londoners is an observation based upon a geographical ethno-nationality where 'Londoners' refer largely to English workmates. This sociological problem arises from his expectations of a different kind of interaction – where socialising and drinking are connected and allow the sharing of intimate and personal experiences between friends. In London however, drinking with English workmates has reinforced for him the separation between drinking and friendships, the former with English colleagues from the building site, and the latter with Polish friends.

'This is Special Humour'

Such constructions of differences were deeply embedded in their interactions within and beyond building sites. As a workplace that employed only physically able men, these differences were marked on their bodies through their nationality, language, and ethnicity.

Whiteness and being male remained a commonality among the participants and other builders on the site. These commonalities however, did not mean that women were excluded from their interactions. On the contrary, sexual boasting and sexual jokes were part of the inherent work cultures – a phenomenon that has been reported in other studies of construction workers. The all-male workforce and restrictions on entry and exit made them isolated from urban spaces, which often served to safeguard the ‘unacceptable’ behaviours of builders. As Ryszard commented, ‘you cannot get accused of chauvinism or something, saying sexist jokes, or something like that. [Laughing] So, you can be not very nice, you can swear, always swear’.

It is worth noting that ‘being nice’ seems to require that women are to be protected from overtly masculine performances – an attitude which reflected particularly traditional ideas of gendered differences among the participants. Women were seen as feminine and sensitive and men were seen as masculine and physically strong. This was reflected on by many participants as one of the reasons why women were not present on building sites. As Karol stated, ‘there couldn’t be a feminine builder, that’s just impossibility to me’. The physical body of the heterosexual male builder was what women had to be protected from – it was impossible for participants to perceive of women working in the building site alongside male builders who were often bare-chested and ‘with hair that long in his legs’ (Karol). Those women who did work on building sites were perceived as lesbian – they were ‘scary’ since they swore like men and were labelled as ‘butch’. The participants’ ideas of masculinity were therefore centred on the aggressive male body of the builder, a body that was partially clothed and heterosexual, and hence threatening for women. Women who did enter this space were those who were able to confront this male body and were therefore homosexual. These traditional ideas of gender differences were used to justify the ‘rightful’ exclusion of women from building sites.

Although participants garnered traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity, unlike their English colleagues, much of these ideas did not translate into overt masculine

performances. Although they would discuss women's bodies among themselves as in the case of Jan earlier, translating this into overt and aggressive performances was seen as unacceptable among participants. Sexual aggressiveness among their English colleagues nevertheless was a common feature on building sites – catcalling, teasing, and staring at women near the building site. Although seen as a humour among their English colleagues, this was nevertheless a version of masculinity that most participants expressed discomfort with.

Do you know how many times I've been embarrassed when I'm driving in a van with two English builders and they open the window and go, 'hey, love'. And I'm like Jesus Christ! It just makes you feel like – 'I don't want to be involved in this'. ... But you can't say that you know, 'cause he'd say 'you're a poof' ... You know, it makes them probably feel more manly if they sort of seem to be interested in a girl on the street with a nice ass. And they make sure they know it. (Karol, interviewed in English)

Karol articulates the different nuances of masculine performances – while for the participants the building site can only include the woman as a lesbian builder, overt sexual performances by men which are directed at women are considered unacceptable. Significantly, these aggressive masculinities also demand heterosexual compliance from other less aggressive men such as Karol. It is during these moments that 'whiteness' among builders gets fractured along gendered ethno-national lines. Karol went on to discuss the differences in their interactions with other women by describing the English builder 'as simple as a bloody wooden chair' and the Polish builder as men with more 'finesse' (Datta and Brickell, 2009). As Karol constructed this discourse of the 'English builder', Polish men were simultaneously constructed in their 'otherness' to Englishness as more subtle and sophisticated gendered subjects in their interactions with both men and women on building sites.

Despite such nuances of acceptable and unacceptable masculinities among English and Polish men, participants reported on a form of humour that was shared solely amongst Polish

men. This humour was often a caricature of sexual violence, but its context was specific to participants' own socio-political histories.

Dawid: Oh, [jokes] about the life. It's sometimes about the life, sometimes we have a – okay, this is only rude jokes that – and um, it's too difficult to catch the sense of humour what we have. You know, for, okay, like. No it's rude, that maybe I ... Okay, okay. Sense of humour like, how you can rape really big fat woman.

Ayona: Do you have an answer to that?

Dawid: Of course, always we have. I must just translate this one. Take her on his [*sic*] forehead next to the wall, splash her arse, and then after three waves you can come in.



Figure 5: Picture taken by Dawid of his Polish friend with whom he shares jokes.

Clearly hesitant to share this with me, Dawid admitted the rudeness, but clarified that it is a Polish 'joke' – one made under very difficult and often extreme circumstances of growing up in a socialist regime where these were everyday coping mechanisms. Moreover, it was only made with a group of people who would immediately understand its context and relate to it politically and historically.

I must translate because ... all of the jokes what we have are from our country as well. From the period when we had the different political system. ... *This is special humour* [my emphasis]. First you must understand the situation, second you must compare the situation with everything what these people did, you know, to survive, to have any money. ... Maybe someone can say 'this was rude, this was wrong'. Maybe. But you have not been there. (Dawid, interviewed in English)

Watson (2000, 204) notes that in socialist Poland, 'although the rulers were male, it was not "men" who ruled'. Thus, although Dawid acknowledges the sexist violence in their jokes, he contextualises these jokes within the hardships of a socialist regime. These jokes are narrated in Polish among those of the same generation and in so doing, reinforce particular forms of masculinity that are constituted by the intersection of generational experiences and gender roles within a socialist moment. While these 'jokes' are about sexual violence, they are also seen as a coping tactics during the violence of survival facing these men in 1980s Poland. Such survival refers to the 'emasculatation' of men in the hands of the socialist State, and the erosion of their patriarchal authority in public and private spheres. It is worth noting that Dawid's construction of Polishness refers to the particular ethno-national territory of Poland, and particular subjects of this political territory, who at a certain moment in history chose to migrate to the UK. This description of 'Polishness' does not include the wider Polish diaspora within London – those who came after the Second World War or indeed any of the second

generation Poles. This is evident in the way that Dawid cautions those who are likely to judge the nature of these jokes, as those who ‘have not been there’.

Significantly, the experiences of women are absent in the recounting and interpretation of such ‘humour’, which reveal the central features of Polish masculinities on building sites — a discursive space where gender identities are constructed with reference to socio-historical and cultural contexts of Polish men that distinguish them from ‘other’ men across ethno-national categories. Such masculinities are mapped onto Polish male bodies and spaces in ambiguous ways – where engaging in crude sexual ‘humour’ is not necessarily perceived as sexist; where the heterosexual working male body is central to masculinity but its visibility outside the workplace is considered undesirable; and where ‘Polish’ gender performances although largely compliant with their English counterparts, are constructed in opposition to Englishness.

CONCLUSIONS

I began with the photograph taken by Ryszard, which for many exemplifies workplace cultures on building sites in the UK. The visual narratives of Ryszard and other participants on the other hand complicate this seamless construction of what has until very recently been perceived as a ‘homogenous white masculinity’ of builders. Their location as white men within the ‘home’ population allows them to actively construct, reshape, and complicate hegemonic white masculine performances on building sites. The insertion of a large number of Polish men in London’s home refurbishment sector bring to the fore hitherto ‘invisible’ differences between white manual workers – through alternative discourses of ethno-nationality, gender roles, and gender performances. They highlight the changing configurations of masculinity that are taking shape through other social categories and that have become relevant after 2004. These masculinities are mapped onto bodies and spaces of Polish builders in ways that are always relational and constructed in opposition to the ‘otherness’ of English builders. Although discursive oppositions might have been constructed during the successive waves of ‘white’

migrants (Irish, Turkish Cypriots, and Australians) in the building industry since the 19th century, the constructions of Polish masculinities are clearly significant as they highlight how EU expansion after 2004 has shaped perceptions of difference within workplaces of manual labour. While notions of difference in the West has largely been constructed by over-racialising the experiences of non-white ‘others’ (Mac an Ghail, 2000) the visual narratives of Polish builders suggest how ‘otherness’ is constructed through their gendered experiences of a socialist past, and migrant experiences within capitalist labour markets in the EU.

The building site as the workplace of manual labour has acquired a central role in these constructions—as exclusive places of male bodily performances which allow socialisation between workers, they are now also sites of difference between those who speak English and those who speak Polish. While they might have traditionally provided spaces of stress-relief from manual work, they are also now spaces of support and networking among migrant Polish men. While social interactions, form integral elements of work cultures on building sites, they also provide ways in which both social and cultural capital can be accumulated by Polish migrants, and highlight the processes through which differences between bodies and masculinities are then fractured along gendered ethno-national lines. These differences are apparent through bodily attire, ways of drinking and socialising, sexist humour and the construction of opposing versions of ‘Polish and ‘English’ masculinities. The particular social and cultural geographies of building sites make such differences more apparent between Polish and English workers in the ways that they are performed by gendered bodies within such confined spaces.

Through particular ways of socialising, teasing, and humour then, Polish workers perform different versions of masculinity that are above all, always constructed in relation to the ‘otherness’ of English builders. The versions of Polish masculinities on the building site highlight the sophistication of Polish men in comparison to the aggressiveness of English men,

and draws careful distinctions between the rude jokes of Polish builders and the rude behaviour of English builders. Thus Polish masculinities, as they take shape on building sites, are primarily about the nuances of gender performances in ways that they differ from English men and are then mapped onto bodies of particular gendered ethno-national subjects. These versions are further fractured across generations – between younger and older Polish men, those who grew up in socialist Poland, and those who did not, those who have gender roles as breadwinners and those who are engaged in more ‘laddish’ masculinities.

Watson notes that ‘in Eastern Europe, deep-seated notions of gender difference often go hand in hand with a lack of any real sense of gender inequality’ (Watson 2000, 71). The visual narratives of the Polish participants suggest complex constructions of gender identities and masculinities that make references to a socialist past where the struggles of men to ‘survive’ are seen as justifications of crude humour around sexual violence. These struggles construct ideas of a heterosexual masculinity that does not necessarily regard women as objects of sexual violence, but rather men as the ‘victims’ of a socialist State. Polish masculinities as constructed by participants are embedded in their emasculation under socialism, and in their new roles as politically empowered workers within capitalist economies – an identification that excludes the wider Polish diaspora living in the UK. Polish masculinities constructed under such conditions evoke particular socio-political and historic moments that connect its subjects through a common experience, which is more about men’s experiences and less about gender relations with women.

Above all, this chapter illustrates that building work is far more than ‘just work’ – they implant the Polish migrants within a whole socio-cultural structure that is new to them, and they provide spaces where their subjective locations vis-à-vis ethnicity, race, whiteness, and gender within wider British and Polish societies are negotiated and transformed. Building sites are not just places of work; they are simultaneously places of social interactions, which provide

support systems and social networks to Polish migrants. While the role of manual work in the construction of masculinities has been well-researched, the role of social interactions in such contexts has been largely overlooked. Yet, as the visual narratives suggest, social interactions during manual work are critical to the construction of migrant experiences and of ‘other’ masculinities in the UK after 2004.

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NOTES

¹ While male unemployment has increasing in traditional blue collar sectors, Kligman (1996) notes that female unemployment continues to be higher and more persistent. Women are less likely to get employed and less likely to be retained during downsizing.

² http://www.constructionskills.net/pdf/research/2004_market_assessment.pdf

³ A national study in 2000 of non-UK born construction workers found that 30 per cent were Irish, 13 per cent were from the Indian sub-continent, 10 per cent were from EU, 6 per cent were from non-EU Europe and 12 per cent were other whites.