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## **‘That’s Where my Perception of it all was Shattered’: Oral Histories and Moral Geographies of Food Sector Employment in an English City Region**

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## **Abstract**

Mutual engagement between geographers and oral historians has been surprisingly limited. The subfield of labour geography in particular might have been expected to make greater use of the practice of oral history to add to understanding of workers' lived experiences, both in employment and beyond the workplace. Moreover, oral history enables workers' moral geographies to be taken seriously, and is attentive to the temporal specificity and inter-subjectivity of people's narratives. This paper draws on four extended case studies of people who worked in the UK food production, packing and processing sector in the 2000s. The analysis complements recent research, which has highlighted harsh employment conditions in the sector. It documents the spatio-temporalities and institutions of food sector employment in Peterborough, England, a city-region from which urban-based workers are bussed out daily to rural jobs. The article raises the possibility that oral history can contribute to greater understanding of common experiences and challenges, and thus to solidarity across ethnic and national groups.

## **Keywords**

*Labour geography; oral history; moral geographies; food production; England*

## **Introduction**

There is surprisingly limited mutual engagement between the discipline of human geography and the practice of oral history (Andrews et al. 2006: 158; High 2010: 109). This is even more striking in the case of the subfield of labour geography, because, like oral history, it originated as a project of the Left (Riley and Harvey 2007: 345; Castree 2010: 461). Labour geography has tended to be concerned with collective struggles by organised workers in the global north, critiquing approaches to economic geography that apparently made no allowance for workers' power to at least partially influence the spaces in which they lived and worked (Herod 1997; 2001). Though the concerns of labour geography as a self-defined field subsequently diversified (see, for example, Bergene et al. 2010), it remains generally lacking in grounded engagement with workers' lived experiences (Kelly 2012: 431-2), and has been rightly criticised for being over-optimistic regarding the potential for workers to shape landscapes of capitalism (Lier 2007: 829), particularly over a timeframe of ascendant neoliberalism and 'worsening conditions... for the majority of workers worldwide' (Coe 2013: 279).

In this context, Castree's call for labour geographers to focus more on workers' moral geographies – 'sets of values relating to modes of conduct – potential and actual – towards other people, near and far' (Castree 2010: 468-9) – seems entirely appropriate. As we argue in this article, oral history can be one means of achieving this. At the same time, oral history can also contribute to more 'temporally integrated geographies' (Kwan 2013) through explicit consideration of the 'timeframe' of research, both in terms of historical time, and time as subjectively experienced and narrated. And, as McDowell's (2013) work bears out, introducing subjective experience does not necessarily mean being celebratory about the extent of workers' power to create change. A major exception among labour geographers in her use of oral history, McDowell's study of international migrant women workers in the UK over six decades shows these workers to have been active, knowing subjects both

in contesting conditions of injustice and exploitation in the workplace and in challenging representations that stereotyped international migrant women according to body size, phenotype, and an assumed division of unpaid reproductive work in the home. McDowell thus reveals both the forces that perpetuate exploitation and inequality in the workplace, and the agency of the workers she and her colleagues interviewed.

This paper uses four extended case studies developed from repeated oral history interviews with workers in a specific sector, place and time: the industrialised food and agriculture sector in the Peterborough city-region of the UK in the 2000s. International migrant workers have come to have a central role in the sector. As with much of McDowell's work, therefore, the article speaks to another of Castree's critiques of labour geography, namely that 'the study of labour migrants... has tended to be undertaken by others [including population geographers]... If one looks at existing exemplar texts in labour geography... migration barely warrants a mention'.<sup>1</sup> Also in common with McDowell, we acknowledge from the start that, most of the time, conditions are not of workers' own choosing; the big picture is dominated by structural inequalities. However, this study differs from McDowell's, not only because it is sector- and region-specific but also because we combine repeated oral history interviews with ethnographic engagement. We make appropriate use of the methodological literature on oral history to understand both our ongoing inter-subjective relations with research participants, and how these provide insights into how workers make sense of their own situations.

Our study forms part of a growing body of research on the impact of structural changes in the food supply chain on contemporary employment regimes in the UK (Rogaly 2008; Strauss 2012; Scott 2013a and b; Findlay and McCollum 2013). Demographic changes in Britain's food sector workforce during the 2000s; the growing importance of packing and distribution work servicing the requirements of supermarket retailers; and the ways in which capital continues to accumulate surplus in the sector in particular regional and national contexts (Thomas 1985; Guthman 2004), including through intensification of workplace regimes (Rogaly 2008), are well-documented.

Unlike existing studies, however, our use of oral history interviews enables us to explore subjective experiences of this employment, its location within varied life trajectories, and participants' moral perspectives both on work in the sector and on the utility of researching it. We thus respond to the tendency of labour geography, as a self-defined field, to '[fail] to put "working people" at the centre of the analysis' (Mitchell 2005: 96). The word 'people' is important here, as it avoids reducing the subjects of such research to the occupation they may have had at a particular point in time. Indeed, we seek to respond to Castree's call for a labour geography that analyses the geographies of employment and labour struggle not in themselves, but as windows onto the *wider* question of how people live and seek to live (2007: 860, emphasis in the original).

Oral history fits well with this agenda, involving as it does the co-production (by researcher and narrator) of extended case studies of 'people', who may have been workers in the sector just for a period; people with multifaceted lives, identities,

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<sup>1</sup> A key exception Castree draws attention to is Mitchell (2006). Indeed, in subsequent work on labour and industrial farming in Bracero-era California, Mitchell (2012) draws on a range of sources, including archived oral history interviews.

geographies and histories that provided a context for the food sector work they did; people whose moral vision regarding work in the sector was developed through experience of working in it (Gough 2010: 132). Because people's morality regarding food sector workplaces may be unconscious or sub-conscious rather than explicitly articulated (Castree 2007: 860), it is useful to analyse oral history interviews both as narratives and as intersubjective events – involving both researcher and narrator as subjects within a broader socio-cultural context. What does *the way people speak* about their workplace experiences in relation to an academic researcher, as well as *what they say about their experiences*, suggest regarding their dynamic, complex and potentially contradictory moral geographies?

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we introduce the spatial, temporal and sectoral context of our study, noting the importance of international migrant workers in the contemporary workforce in food production, processing and packing in the study region and briefly summarising surveys of employment conditions in the 2000s and early 2010s. The third section explains the oral history methodology we used. In section four we draw on four extended case studies, which are then discussed together in section five. Section six concludes by returning to the core issues raised in the article concerning the use of oral history in labour geography.

### **A labour hub in the English Fens**

The eastern edge of Peterborough abuts the westernmost portion of the Fens, an industrialised rural region for which food processing has been identified as 'fundamental' (Green et al. 2009: 1271). According to the National Farmers' Union (NFU), in the mid-2000s food and drink manufacturers in the region turned over £1.7 billion annually and, 'together with businesses that pack and distribute produce, employ[ed] around 17,500 people in the Fens'. The Fens were also the site of a major concentration of national agricultural and horticultural production with 4,000 farms accounting for 24 per cent of all potatoes, 37 per cent of the field vegetables and 28 per cent of the bulbs grown in England (NFU 2008: 1, 3, 5, 9).

Since the 1990s, there has been an increasing reliance of farms and food packing and processing companies in the Fens, and also nationally, on international migrant workers. One estimate based on analysis of official data on the registration of EU accession country nationals between 2004 and 2010 found that they accounted for 40 per cent of the agricultural workforce – a far higher ratio than in any other sector (McCollum 2013: 36).<sup>2</sup> The harvesting, packing and processing of food involve labour-intensive work. Evidence showed that moves made by international migrant workers complemented, rather than substituted for, British workers, who, even in the years following the post-2008 recession, had shown themselves to be reluctant to take up work under the conditions required (Findlay and McCollum 2013: 12).<sup>3</sup>

Peterborough has long been a labour hub for the food sector in surrounding rural areas, including the Fens. Crucially it is the headquarters of a large number of

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<sup>2</sup> Food processing was not included in this calculation.

<sup>3</sup> This had not always been the case. Although there is a long history of migrant working in British agriculture stretching back until at least the first half of the nineteenth century, as recently as the 1980s one trade union report was concerned about 'the growing black economy in agricultural areas close to conurbations, where part-time British workers were threatening the jobs of farm workers by working for tax-free wages, without insurance or sick-pay' (Conford and Burchardt 2011).

employment agencies, whose businesses revolve around physically transporting people to different worksites depending on the demand for workers on the day. Stenning et al. (2006) use the term ‘city region’ for Peterborough and explore its extensive linkages to the surrounding countryside. While ‘city region’ has become less commonly used in geography, East Anglia, of which the Fens and Peterborough are part, has been singled out as one place where the term makes sense, at least ‘as an organizing concept for spatial development policy’ (Healey 2009: 832, 837). This might well include policy responses to the arrival of large numbers of international migrants in cities such as Peterborough in the 2000s.

Indeed, the population of Peterborough increased dramatically between 2001 (157,439) and 2011 (183,631). Much of this growth came from migration to the city by nationals of eight of the countries that acceded to the European Union (EU) in 2004, whilst there was also a significant rise in Portuguese nationals.<sup>4</sup> Earlier, in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the city had seen the arrival of thousands of migrants from other countries, including Italy, Pakistan and Uganda. A survey of 278 more recently arrived international migrant workers undertaken for the city council in early 2008 found that over 30 per cent gave their workplace as *outside* the city, in surrounding counties. The report drew a direct connection between the growth in the number of migrant workers living in Peterborough and working conditions in agriculture and food processing, referring to ‘the segregation of new migrant workers into agriculture and food processing plants through poor pay, long hours and shift-pattern working’ (Scullion and Morris 2009: 32).

Similar conditions were reported by two national studies of food sector employment in the early 2010s, also based on interviews with workers. One study used community interviewers to gather testimony from 62 people across England and Scotland, including not only agriculture and food processing but also the ‘minority ethnic catering’ sector (Scott et al. 2012). The forced labour practices they identify bring out important aspects of recent employment experiences in the sector, including humiliating treatment by supervisors, being used ‘more as machines’ than people, and being tied-in by work permits. The material is hard-hitting, revealing the ‘psychological harm’ that workers in the sector can experience (Scott et al. 2012: 41, 42, 65). The second recent national study was commissioned by the UK Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) into employment conditions in one specific subsector: meat and poultry processing (EHRC 2012). The report found that supermarkets operated downward pressure on meat and poultry prices, leading to reductions in labour costs, including wages and the proportion of staff employed on permanent contracts.

These national reports based on interviews with workers are of vital importance as sources of evidence in struggles for workplace justice. Indeed, as we describe our methodology in the next section, our own study also aimed at doing more than merely researching, especially at the urban scale.

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<sup>4</sup> Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity Area Profiler, <http://www.ethnicity.ac.uk/census/>, accessed 2 August 2013.

## Oral histories and working-class geographies

Neither of us was born or brought up in Peterborough.<sup>5</sup> But then, nor were most of the people we interviewed. We were there because we were part of a team that was specifically funded to carry out research in the city. In the context of Peterborough's fast-changing demography, we used oral history, in collaboration with theatre, film and photography practitioners, to try to bring together residents who were apparently unfamiliar with each other because of their differing ethnicities, countries of origin and migration histories.<sup>6</sup> We hoped that oral history interviews could be transformative not only for the individual narrator and interviewer, but also through enabling greater understanding among working-class residents in the city, across ethnic and national groups, of challenges they faced in common, which we hoped would build opposition to racism. Among the important commonalities we believed might emerge were workplace experiences in the food sector. If experience of workplace inequality and exploitation shapes people's moral outlook (Gough 2010: 131), reflective oral history interviews might be opportunities for such moral positions to be articulated to a wider audience.

How and what people remember, how they talk about it, what they choose to tell, and why, are key areas of analysis for oral history practitioners. At one level, there is no single objective truth but rather a bundle of renditions of past experience, recorded in particular circumstances (Abrams 2010). Yet, multiple and repeated oral history interviews also yielded a broad picture of how food sector jobs and their associated spatio-temporalities and institutions, such as employment agencies, group commuting in minivans and informally rented private accommodation, were experienced by workers in the city-region at the time of the research. In this article we attempt to hold in tension the different registers of analysis that i) provide insights into the four individuals whose stories are explored in depth, including how they wanted their story to come across, and the moral geographies associated with this, and ii) enable us to comment on food sector work in a particular city-region at a particular time.

The paper brings in unique testimonies of workers whose narratives do not have a place in the archive. These are people who tell their stories looking back over time, having subsequently experienced greater comfort and security than the most intensive work in the food supply chain allows. Trajectories are not linear, and seemingly more comfortable workplaces contain conflicts; the search for economic security and life fulfilment continues. But the temporal location of these four narrators as *former* insiders to some of the toughest food sector workplace regimes enables them to reflect from a distance of sorts. Portelli argues 'a life history is a living thing. It is always a work in progress, in which narrators revise the image of their own past as they go along... the researcher's path crosses the narrator's at erratic times, and the collected life history is the result of this chance occurrence' (1991: 61). Our encountering people *formerly* ensconced in food sector work with long, antisocial and often unpredictable shifts, was nevertheless patterned, in that access to workers *currently* engaged in such work would have been far harder except through their

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<sup>5</sup> Rogaly had previous history in both Peterborough's rural hinterland and in a study of a neighbouring city (see Rogaly 2008; Rogaly and Taylor 2009), whilst Qureshi had personal connections in Peterborough that allowed her to find a host family as a base for residential fieldwork.

<sup>6</sup> <http://placesforall.co.uk>

employers – something that raises important ethical challenges (Anderson et al. 2006).

While inter-subjectivity lies at the heart of oral history interviews and narratives (James 2000; Herbert 2007; Abrams 2010), it is relatively rarely explored by geographers (though see Cameron 2012: 576-9). Yet, these stories are co-created through relationships between at least two subjects – researcher and narrator – and, further, they are told in relation to contemporary cultural norms and the specific location and atmosphere of the interview. This contains its own paradox. Whilst, as we suggested at the outset, oral history began as a committed project of the Left, a sense of political closeness to a narrator does not turn the researcher into an insider. There remains an inequality to the relationship (Portelli 1991: 38). In spite of this, Portelli himself is optimistic about building equality in oral history fieldwork, which needs to be seen as based on ‘encounter[s] between two subjects who recognise each other as subjects’ (1991: 43). The oral history fieldwork that we have drawn on in this article brings us as researchers into the discussion through the multiple encounters we had with each of the narrators of the stories. These stories were told to us as subjects and emerge out of our own interventions as well as narrators’ reflections on the person they were speaking to and the utility or otherwise of the research. This process was enabled by the relationships that developed over repeated visits and interactions outside the interview situation. Clearly, repeated interviews do not always guarantee understanding and friendship, as Daniel James (2000) found in a second interview with a former meat-packing organiser in Argentina – in this case the second interview revealed a reactionary narrative that James recoiled from. But, as with Blee’s work on the Ku Klux Klan (1993), this provoked productive reflections on the politics of his own research process and whether it could ever be part of radical change.

We conducted 76 oral history interviews in Peterborough in 2011 and 2012, 64 of which were life history interviews, 35 with women and 29 with men. Rogaly stayed in the city three days a week from March to December 2011. Qureshi lived there for three months during June to September. We sought to maximise the variety of routes through which we encountered participants, both meeting people through the families we lodged with, as well as through our wider residential fieldwork and contacts in the city council and other organisations. We undertook that participants would be sent the transcript of their interview for review and be able to make amendments to it before we sought permission to quote from it in our writings, play script and website, and asked whether they would prefer the material anonymised for this purpose. Participants were also made aware from the outset, that, if they were willing when consulted later in the process, the amended transcript would be deposited with the local library archives. We encountered a diverse range of responses, from people who were happy to be involved in an interview but did not want to spend time reviewing their transcript, to others who meticulously checked through it and made amendments of various kinds. Fifty participants signed forms consenting to have the transcript of their interview made available in the library.

The research participants, who ranged in age from seventeen to over ninety, had a range of occupations at the time of the interviews. In the next section we have selected the stories of four people who had worked in the food production, processing and/or packing in the 2000s, at least for a period. We do not claim that these cases are representative and have already noted that significant understanding of work in the UK food sector has been gained through short, one-off interviews and surveys. Instead, following the lead of others writing outside self-defined labour geography

(see, for example, Walton-Roberts and Pratt 2005; Walsh 2006; Lee and Pratt 2011), we seek to elucidate insights from a very small number of telling cases, which can be treated in sufficient depth to enable something of the individuality and diversity of the subjects to remain in the text. As Battisti and Portelli put it, regarding their analysis of a ‘few significant narratives’ from the broader group of international students with whom they had carried out oral history research: ‘while not representative in statistical terms, they represent a shared subjective horizon of possibilities and desire. They stand for the fact that not all non-European presences in Italy can be summed up in the stereotypes of the victim or the peddler-beggar-pusher. In admittedly varying degrees, all migrants are bearers of knowledge, and all struggle to retain a degree of choice and control over their lives’ (1994: 37-38).

In the next section we draw in turn on the four selected narrators’ life histories, focusing on their subjective portrayal of their work in the food sector as seen looking back from the time of the interviews in 2011 and 2012. All four participants were people with whom we continued to have contact and interaction beyond the interviews themselves, which took place in a variety of locations – a hotel lobby, participants’ homes, a city-centre bar and a man’s clothing shop. We make reference to the inter-subjectivity both of the interviews and of other encounters with the same research participants. In the discussion that then follows we consider what the content of these stories, and the different modes of narrative, reveal about these participants’ moral geographies and how this can contribute to labour geography.

#### **Four people at work in the Peterborough city region food sector**

##### *Maria*

At the time of Rogaly’s first meeting with Maria, in October 2011, she was working in a skilled, technical role in a dairy produce factory in Peterborough. She was born in Poland in 1982 and grew up in a mountain village near to Krakow, before going away to study for a diploma in food technology. Maria’s father and mother had had a horticultural business but this had hit the rocks, and when she was fifteen her mother started travelling to Italy to work as a carer for the elderly. Maria described her family as ‘quite poor’ at that time.

She reflected back on childhood work in her family’s smallholding with a degree of ambivalence. The memory of the smell of potatoes being harvested caused her to pause. Aware that part of our research agenda was to study working arrangements she also wanted to stress that, though hard, she did not feel the work she had done as a child in the family fields was exploitative:

Maria: ...let’s say when I was nine years old I remember we had to go into the fields and we were [gathering in the hay] and picking the potatoes and I remember now this, I’m missing this very much because I like the smell of... not the compost but, not the earth, what is that when you’re digging?

Rogaly: The earth to dig the potatoes?

Maria: Yeah.

Rogaly: And the smell of it.



Maria: Yes the smell of [the earth] and sometimes I'm going home and I say, 'Oh my God I love to go to the field and do some job' but they are laughing... because we know this is a really hard job and just... saying, 'Yes, yeah of course'. But it's nice to think about this... I'm all right with that what I was doing as a child. I don't feel like I was doing anything hard job like a slave or something like that at all.

Maria encountered the world of food supply chain employment agencies in 2002 when she and her mother used an agency to seek work in the UK. This had to be clandestine because it preceded Poland's accession to the EU in 2004. They were set up at a carrot-processing plant near Kings Lynn, thirty-five miles to the north-east of Peterborough on the other side of the Fens. This was described by Maria as one of the 'cold hells' that characterised her early experience in the UK:

There is a lot of cold hells in England, believe me <laughs> because mostly where you go in working here, it's just factories with the fruit or something so, I've got the problems with my fingers still now because I've got problems with circulation now...

Every aspect of life in the UK was arranged by the agency, from hiring to arranging accommodation, transport and linking them up with language schools, for which the agency levied charges that had to be repaid over a long period of time. Maria's narrative spoke both to that context and what she saw as Rogaly's interest in exploitative working conditions. As with the story of horticultural work as a child, Maria took some control over how this was portrayed. Yes, the agency had power. It was, she told Rogaly, 'like a net'. Yet she did not condemn them outright. She wanted to convey that she could see through their illicit means of accruing income and understand that these payments were a necessary price to get access to the British labour market at that time:

Yes so I think they've been very clever and always with a smile but nothing happened, nothing wrong happened to us... so I'm not going to say anything wrong about them because that was their business. If you want to work, come, but you have to pay.

While she partly longed for the horticultural work of her childhood, Maria actively sought to prevent her home village being portrayed as subsistence-based. Indeed, over a short time period the village itself had rapidly transformed away from self-provisioning food production. Maria chose 'Africa' as a metaphor for what her home place was not: 'it's like I think that maybe you can see us like people living in Africa, hunting and growing the vegetables'. She also saw her Polish home as precious, valuable to her and liable to be misunderstood by Rogaly in other ways. She did not want any of the photographs she showed him to be reproduced in any publication we might come up with.

I think it doesn't mean anything for you! <laughs> ... I know I am going to be there again, I'm going to be on this hill because every time I'm going there when I'm coming back to home. I don't know, I like Peterborough as well, but I think... this is my place more.

Maria experienced the sharp end of the reliance of labour-providing agencies on the vulnerability of undocumented workers. The velocity of her narrative (see Portelli 1991: 49) slowed right down when she spoke of this, as she remembered the intense feeling of humiliation on being taken into custody and deported because she did not have permission to work in the UK.

They took me and put me with other people inside a big van. So I remember that and from that place I had sent some texts to people that they'd caught me, just be careful or something like that... they found a lot of tissues in my pockets, you know like from the tears and that. I remember that because they were laughing and maybe I was laughing at that time as well, but anyway, I spent that night in the cell which was terrible. The food they brought us was disgusting. I took a shower, they didn't let me change the clothes. I wear the same clothes. I was not stinking but really I felt dirty and humiliated.

Time speeded up again when Maria reconstructed her working life as a line worker in food-packing and processing plants both before her deportation and following her return in 2004. She spoke from the vantage point of her current job, where she no longer felt at the bottom of the pile, 'the worst' in an ethnicised hierarchy. Running through her narrative regarding treatment at workplaces and in accommodation in Peterborough's private rental market is a struggle for respect. Referring to her work in a fruit-packing factory in Yaxley, just outside Peterborough, Maria called it a 'terrible job':

For example in this place where I'm working now, a dairy factory, I can go to the toilet whenever I want... I don't know, it's like different world, when you are in a factory you are not allowed to speak too much or ...

Polish people stayed on the line and were doing cutting grapes, picking fruits or checking, that stuff, sorting the fruits, and people who were the team leaders or supervisors were Pakistani people, because they could speak proper English. That was the only thing...

At one point Maria became ill, left the food factory work, became eligible for public housing, and was allocated a flat where she still lives. Informal private rental deals were crucial for people working through agencies in food sector work in 2000s Peterborough. Many of the landlords had Pakistani heritage (Erel 2011). Maria reflected on the accommodation she had rented from Pakistani landlords in Peterborough in the past and what she concluded about Pakistanis as a group from this experience.

The adult people, they were all right with us... but I know a lot of Pakistani was using Polish people. They're still using those who are not speaking English... they're just trying to make money on us, that's the thing, and they haven't got ... I think they haven't got respect for us... I would say that maybe English knows more about us than Pakistani because probably Pakistani doesn't bother, because they ask for example if we've got electricity in Poland or if we've got gas, or... they think that it's the third world where we live, like Africa. <Laughs>

Maria reflected on English people too, pitying them for what she saw as their loose morals, split families and selfishness. She wanted to ‘talk mostly about the English because this topic is interesting for me as well and sometimes I feel like I’m doing on my own a little, what’s that? Like research’.

### *Matt*

Matt was working in a menswear shop in the centre of Peterborough when Rogaly met him in 2011. He was born in Kłodzko in western Poland in 1978, moving for three years as an infant to live with his maternal grandparents in a poor rural part of east-central Poland. This was a formative period for Matt. Like Maria, he had strong memories of life in the countryside, and, looking back, idealised aspects of that life in spite of its poverty. He also began to reveal a strong moral compass.

[People in the village] would pop in to get some water from our well and the well was quite deep and the water was very cold, and very fresh and really refreshing, revitalising, it was fantastic. And people had time for each other and they talked to each other and they helped each other. If you were passing and there were people working out in the field you would greet them, they’d have responded, perhaps you’d have a little chat with them – people were much closer [...]

Matt was also conscious of our interest in work-place relations and near the start of his narrative he volunteered information about what he saw as the forced labour undertaken by both his grandfathers during the Second World War. By contrast, when Matt thought back to the first strawberry farm he had worked on in Suffolk in 2001 as a student through the Seasonal Agricultural Workers’ Scheme (SAWS), he remembered this first visit in very benign terms.

We weren’t rushing around like blue-arsed flies so there was chat and it was quite relaxing and really good.

Matt was surprised, when, having arrived on a Saturday, the small group of workers were told there would be no work on the Sunday and were also offered a lift to church, should they wish to go. The farm manager was technically gifted and had all the strawberries in tunnels with raised beds so that there ‘was no bending, there was no picking on your knees’. And it was from this farm that Matt, an opera buff, who had written reviews for the Poznan Opera House magazine and collected the autographs of a number of famous stars, was able to visit London to see Pavarotti perform in Hyde Park.<sup>7</sup>

Matt’s second stint on a strawberry farm at the beginning of the 2002 brought him to the Fens. This was a large farm made up of a number of rented holdings crossing a wide area, and required a much more demanding daily routine:

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<sup>7</sup> Matt was disappointed that he had not been able to follow what had once promised to be a musical career of his own, and preferred to emphasise his love for opera to his work in agriculture in the quote he chose to accompany his portrait photograph, see <http://placesforall.co.uk/portfolio/mateusz-tarnawski/>.

The work was much harder... We were coming seven o'clock, spot on, we were on the fields, so obviously we had to get up earlier and get on the vans earlier to be there for seven o'clock but also the farm was quite huge. He was one of the major producers of strawberries.

Moreover, the workers were paid per punnet of strawberries rather than per hour, as Matt had been on the Suffolk farm. The bending, and possibly the fast pace required, meant he 'had a period of about ten days... where I literally couldn't feel one of my legs'. The piecework had meant pressure to work harder and faster and had not suited Matt. He interpreted the divergent responses of different workers to the incentive element of piece rates as reflecting the relative poverty of the countries from which they had come, picking up a frequent tendency of the narrators to use national stereotypes:

[The piece work was] not so great for myself because I was never a great picker. I wasn't the worst but I felt a bit depressed, we always looked at the Russians and Lithuanians and Ukrainians, you could just see [chi, chi, chi, chi] in those strawberry bushes, you know <laughs> and leaves flying in all directions! [...] It was widely known between us, the Poles and the Czechs, that they were from the poor country and they were absolutely desperate for money and their standard of life was nowhere near ours. Even if you looked at the pictures, they brought the pictures of their family and you looked at people's clothes, at the furniture where it was taken, you could tell, they wanted money much more than ourselves.

Matt talked of his third strawberry-picking experience in resoundingly negative terms, as a transformation that lifted the scales from his eyes about the whole set-up for food supply chain workers in the UK: 'that farm was a disaster and that's where my perception of it all was shattered'. He was particularly offended by the farm manager. Matt described an incident in which the manager asked the workers to pick a field that had become flooded because her dogs, 'the little awful beasts', were biting the irrigation tapes. This eventually led to a minor rebellion:

She would say, 'you need to pick the rest of the field', and we said, 'there is *NO* rest of the field, it's all dead plants there because of your dogs – there's no pressure in the pipes, it's all leaked out in here, that's why it's muddy and you've got the lake'. 'No, you've got to pick it'. And we *didn't*, it was like a rebellion and she was threatening that she would get rid of all of us and get some other students. And we were like, 'Well, you try it'. So she didn't, but we would literally start work at eight o'clock, finishing at two o'clock and the money was peanuts.

By the time Matt came back to England in May 2004, Poland had acceded to the European Union (EU) and he was therefore an EU national rather than a student on the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme. Nevertheless, because he had known there would be work there, the first job he had with his new immigration status was back on the strawberry farm in the Fens. In September the same year he moved to work in a fruit salad factory in Wisbech. He described what he experienced as a corrupt workplace regime at the factory. Part of this was to do with hygiene. According to Matt, fruit salads were even assembled from the dustbin waste:

All this fruit, plastic, plastic foil, labels, whatnot, all the rubbish, anything swept from the floor... And they're getting the fruit out of it to make the salads. Did that make your day?

Matt's role was Line Recorder. He would set the machines for particular fruit, set the use-by date and give the line workers the signal to start. Senior to him was a team leader, reporting to a manager. The team leaders did very little themselves.

They were holy cows who were there, hands in their pockets, enjoying themselves, chat, ha ha ha, planning next Friday night or discussing the previous one, how drunk they were etc. and that was it.

Matt described the separate seating practices in the canteen and the sense that anyone in a management position had of being higher up, of more value. The hierarchy was ethnically marked. 'There was plenty of contempt', he said, 'even Portuguese were kind of... a few positions ahead of us'.

When Matt left the factory job and moved to Peterborough to seek work, one of his first ports of call was a high street employment agency, which allocates temporary workers to office positions. Here he experienced direct racism. He wanted Rogaly to 'name and shame' the agency:

She said, 'People will be put off when you introduce yourself over the phone so may I suggest that you change your name and surname into something more English-like?' I said, 'Would you have the courage to say it to any of the Asians?' and I just walked off... I found that absolutely shocking, appalling and I never, ever went anywhere near them.

### *Ana Rosa and Randy*

Ana Rosa was a housewife and part-time sales representative for a beauty product firm when Qureshi met with her and Randy, her husband, in July 2011. She was born in 1977 in a town in Portugal and by then had lived in Peterborough for over a decade. Her mother had worked in a clothes factory; her father migrated to work in Switzerland when Ana Rosa was small. In 1997, her parents were recruited for work in England by an agency in Peterborough that contracted workers for food sector pack houses. Although they were EU nationals, their unfamiliarity with England and limited spoken English made them just as reliant on unscrupulous agents as Maria:

That agency used to bring a lot of people to the UK to work for them, but when they get here they used to work, work, work and never see a single penny. Loads of Portuguese were through the agency and they all started running away because they used to hurt them if they're not going to work. My dad, I think one time... ran away, they found a little shelter to stay for a couple of days, and one of the friends of them helped them afterwards, they got them a little flat and another place to work.

By the time Ana Rosa arrived in Peterborough in 1999 her parents were back with the same agency because 'that was the only company we knew'. Responding to Qureshi's interest in working conditions, Ana Rosa slowed her narrative down and detailed the routines maintained by the agency. They would wake at 3.30am in order

to be ready and walk down to the pick-up point on Lincoln Road by 5am. The agency minibus would pick them up at 5am and drive out through small winding roads, past deep rivers that frightened Ana Rosa in the dark, to the factory in the Fens near Ely, 24 miles south-east of Peterborough. They would assemble ready to start work at 6am and then work through to 8pm. From 6am to 7pm they would stand at a conveyor belt, eight people to a side, packing mixed peppers and broccoli as they tumbled along. At 7pm the packing would stop and the workers would clean the entire premises, including the toilets, which Ana Rosa described with disgust.

The questions that Qureshi asked of Ana Rosa made her 'conversational narrative' (James 2000) dwell on the poor conditions in which she had worked. The job was exhausting and ill-paid – in 1999 Ana Rosa earned £150 for working 16 hours a day, seven days a week. But what Ana Rosa really wanted to talk about was the relationships she made on the shop floor. She remembered how she had to endure her father's controlling eye and the gossip of the other Portuguese workers on the line, to whom her father had told something of her earlier life in Portugal, against her wishes. But moreover, she remembered making friends with an English woman who was working as a supervisor. Ana Rosa taught her Portuguese – in exchange for English – to help her to flirt with one of the other vegetable-packers:

I started telling her jokes, funny words, and she used to go to the boy and said to him, 'you're an idiot', in Portuguese, and the boy started liking her, and joking with her and everything. I think they were friendly with us; I really enjoyed spending time with them. And when I used to go for cleaning the canteen, she used to come running, 'I'm coming to help you!' She wasn't allowed because she was part of the management, but she used to ask all the time, if I need her help.

Two months into her time at the factory in Ely, Ana Rosa was laid up for a year because of a horrific road accident on the way back to Peterborough; this was a major event in her life, one that left her with scars all over her body. The minibus belonged to the employment agency and was full of Portuguese workers from the packing factory. It was winding its way past the small town of Ramsey at 8pm when it collided with a car that was coming the other way. Sitting in a seat with a faulty seatbelt, Ana Rosa was catapulted through the front window. She remembered, in an ironic tone, that the owner of the agency had sent her a bouquet of flowers after the accident. Meanwhile, she was paid nothing during her recovery as it turned out that the minibus was not insured and she was not covered for statutory sick pay.

When I got back to work I had a big bouquet of flowers on the table for me, and he came, shook my hand, 'oh, how is your face? How are your stitches?' But he never talked about paying my money that I lost for all that time because it wasn't my fault.

After a bitter dispute over the uninsured minibus, and fed up with the long hours and low pay, Ana Rosa found another agency and began to work at a fruit-packing factory near Huntingdon, 24 miles south of Peterborough. She worked at that factory for over a year and was made a company employee for the first time in her life. It was there she met Randy, with whom she became romantically involved and was later to marry. While Qureshi had side-tracked them with questions about working conditions, Ana Rosa, and later Randy, took control of the conversation and re-established 'narrative as such' (James 2000) by drawing out the meanings of their first encounter.

Randy was born in Sylhet in Bangladesh in 1976 and moved to England in 1982 after the death of his father, to join his father's brother in Rochdale. Randy left school at 15 to enter the uncle's curry house, and for the next ten years, he moved between different curry houses owned by his relatives. When he recalled how he had finally left the restaurant industry, his face lit up with pleasure. His first job was in a chocolate factory in Corby, where he worked with

Polish people, Bengali people, English people, Jamaicans, different people. And you get to make a conversation with them, 'How's life back home?' Different countries; different languages; different religion and things... because as you're working, you can talk whereas in the restaurant, you are taking orders, 'Yes, sir, yes sir...' and you take it in the kitchen, come back in, you're not talking to no one.

He next got a job as a recruiter for an agency in Thrapston. His job was to drive agency workers to packing factories. Filling in for the agency as a supervisor at the fruit-packing factory near Huntingdon, he met Ana Rosa working on the oranges line with her parents. Telling Qureshi about their first meeting, Randy slipped into a reverie. It all started with his ambivalence about his role as a supervisor, and feeling like he wanted to join in with the agency workers;

I put my clipboard to one side my pen and everything, start working the line and just talking to the people, and they're thinking 'Why is he working with us?' But because I was bored, I didn't know, I was talking, no problem. And then I see Ana Rosa, I don't want to like ... scared, not talking, she was very quiet, you know. I think I just chat her up. <Laughter> [...] I picked up a mouldy orange, chucked it at her, it went all over her! <Laughter> She looked at me. I said, 'I'm sorry, bad orange, bad orange'. And then she wanted to say something but she couldn't, kept looking and smirking, seems really interested. If you have someone else, they'd probably throw it back at me, start up a bit of fun. So I'm working, working, had a bad apple as well, so I chucked it at her, everybody you see gets a bit mucky, greeny and flaky powder was all over her uniform.

After the children came along, Ana Rosa left the factory and became a housewife. Randy moved between various jobs in the food sector eventually securing an agency position at Perkins Engines,<sup>8</sup> the pinnacle of his working life, turning him into a breadwinner with a family wage. However, in the summer of 2011, when Qureshi was meeting with them, Randy had been dismissed from Perkins because of an alleged racially-aggravated dispute he had had with a Pakistani colleague on the shop floor. Randy and Ana Rosa's experiences of extreme exploitation at the hands of agencies in the food sector made them determined to appeal against the agency. This was in spite of the agency warning Randy that even if he did win the appeal, he would not get his Perkins job back. Possibly, they might give him a job out near one of the Fen towns such as Spalding, Wisbech or March, but Randy said he didn't want that – 'where we live, in Parnwell, Perkins is only five minutes away from our house'. He was no longer willing to put up with that kind of lifestyle. He and Ana Rosa blamed

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<sup>8</sup> Perkins Engines, established in 1932, is the single largest employer in Peterborough, and in its heyday in the 1970s employed 10,000 workers at its Eastfield site. At the end of 1997 Perkins Engines was acquired by Caterpillar Inc.

the agency and what they saw as ethnic favouritism on behalf of the Polish agency staff.

## **Discussion**

All four of these selected extracts offer glimpses into transformational change and self-making in contexts of ongoing struggles for dignity and recognition. The oral history interview itself becomes an opportunity for ‘shared authority’ (Frisch 1990), for the narrators to teach others (readers of the transcripts, the oral history researcher) how labour processes played out in particular times and spaces and in the context of workers’ whole lives. The material reflects the ‘erratic times’ that our paths crossed as well as the historical times being remembered. It conveys subjective experiences of food sector employment at various points in the 2000s from the vantage point of a specific present. Yet, while exploitation, unequal economic power and racialised and ethnicised power hierarchies in past food sector work are tangible in the interviews, in none of the four cases is this present narrated simply as a comfortable time of escape following heroic resistance, or as a time of continued dejection and victimhood.

All four narrators were at one stage international migrants to the UK; all except Randy first arrived in the early to mid-2000s. They came from three different countries of origin (Poland, Portugal and Bangladesh) and moved to the UK under different circumstances, whether individually motivated, like Matt, or following on from a family move, like the other three. All narrated previous international migration by members of their families. Both of Matt’s grandfathers were, in his words, ‘forced labourers’ in Germany during the Second World War; Ana Rosa’s father had worked in Switzerland; and Maria’s mother was intermittently employed in Italy; when Randy’s father died his uncle was leaned on to allow Randy to join him in England. Running alongside narratives of spatial mobility, Maria and Matt’s moral geographies were both expressed partly through the idiom of a childhood home place. This is not simply nostalgic – conflict and hardship are evident in both stories, for example in Matt’s reference to the extent of his grandparents’ poverty and war-time forced labour. However, nostalgia, when it does occur, should not simply be dismissed. It can have its uses in articulating challenges to contemporary injustices (see Jones 2012: 128-130) and in taking ownership of one’s own story – an implicit critique of academic research endeavours such as ours. The showing of a photograph of Maria’s home in the village created distance between her and Rogaly as interviewer. She said that it could never have meaning for him, as it was her home. The telling of oral history enables these narrators to reclaim personhood, to be more than merely ‘workers’ in a study of the food sector.

Food sector employment in the decade before the interviews was remembered via spaces of work, including the factory line, and also through spaces of worker transport, informally-contracted private rental accommodation, and in Maria’s case, the spaces of detention in a police vehicle and cell. While Matt objected to the ethnicised hierarchy he remembered in the space of the fruit salad factory at Wisbech between 2004 and 2007, Randy portrayed relations in a Huntingdon fruit-packing factory as enjoyably cosmopolitan, at least much of the time. Randy’s moral worldview built on the food factory line as a space of relative freedom when contrasted with the tightly constrained workspaces he had experienced in his uncle’s curry houses. Indeed, he and Ana Rosa’s relationship began as a flirtation on the factory floor and this, rather than harsh working conditions, was what they both chose to emphasise in narrating their work in fruit-packing. Ana Rosa had enjoyed the



potential for attraction and banter between other workers too, the pain of remembering the oppressiveness of her father's presence in the workplace being ameliorated in her rendering of the gentle teasing between an English woman and a Portuguese man.

All the narrators appreciated workplaces where talking or chatting was not penalised. Randy valued the conversation that he could have on the factory floor, something which ran completely against the culture narrated by another research participant, Nina, at a potato-grading and packing plant she described as like a 'war camp', where people were prohibited from speaking and kept their heads bowed.<sup>9</sup> Connecting with his earlier childhood memory of people having time for each other in his grandparents' village, Matt spoke highly of the first strawberry farm he worked on in England: 'we weren't rushing around like blue-arsed flies so there was chat and it was quite relaxing and really good'. Read out of context, this statement could be mistaken for the words of a lazy person. Far from it. Indeed Matt's moral view, sometimes expressed forthrightly, saw good in people pulling their weight at work. He expressed anger in remembering the 'corruption' of a 'clique' of team leaders at the Wisbech fruit salad factor whom he saw as having been parasitic on others.

Each narrative conveys something of how the passing of time had shifted both the speaker's view on the morality of food sector workplaces, and their capacity to stand up to exploitation. Randy's fight for the permanent position at Perkins engineering that he saw as rightfully his expressed a weary familiarity with the outlying work locations in the city-region's labour market – he saw it as unjust that he would have to go back to agency working at all, and certainly not if it involved having to work in the Fens. His position on this was also shaped by his changing life trajectory, now that he was part of a family with three young children. Randy was not alone among the four narrators in continuing to struggle after leaving more exploitative food sector work. Matt verbally challenged and walked out of the high street employment agency in Peterborough that would not put him on their books unless he changed his name. This too was immoral in his view, because it discriminated against him for having a foreign-sounding name. Yet, in contrast, he remembered his first UK workplace, the first of three strawberry farms he worked on, as entirely benign, the British employer showing respect through recognising his technical skills, organising a church service for those who wanted it, and enabling him to attend an opera. It was the third strawberry farm where his 'perceptions of it all were shattered'.

In distinctive individual ways the narrators attended to how their experiences might be represented through the research. Matt took much care going through his transcript making sure that references to people and places were accurate for the benefit of potential readers. Maria was cautious and thoughtful about the image of her past and current life she was presenting in the interview – she did not want to be seen as a slave, as primitive or a victim of exploitation. For her, dignity and respect were paramount both in the workplace, and in the way her story was made public through the research. She refused to be straitjacketed in the role of the 'researched', speaking about the research she was doing on 'the English'. Questioning whether the research could have any effect at all on grossly unequal power relations, she drew attention to

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<sup>9</sup> Nina's case was discussed at length in a talk given by the authors at the annual general meeting of the Peterborough Racial Equality Council in June 2012, available at (<http://placesforall.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/Theme-work-PDF-moocow-12-3-13.pdf>).

the question of the morality of such projects in themselves and whether they are more attuned to the career advancement of the researchers than any more progressive agenda.

## Conclusion

On returning to Peterborough in summer 2013 to attend a baby shower at the invitation of a Brazilian-Polish couple in their twenties, both former food sector workers, Rogaly met up with Maria, who had read through the draft of her case study in this article and commented that Peterborough now felt more her home than the Polish village she had grown up in – a change since the interviews she had given almost two years previously. Time passes and subjective experiences are seen in a different light. Oral history can enable not only an approach to labour geography that takes workers' moral geographies seriously, but one which is more aware of the temporal specificity of people's narratives.

The people whose histories we have extracted from in this study have brought in imagery of times and places beyond those of their own experience – e.g. Matt's grandfathers' experiences of 'forced labour' in the Second World War, Maria's use of 'Africa' as 'other' – to locate their subjective experiences of the Peterborough city-region's food sector workplaces in space and time. This is enhanced by analysis of these four narratives as explicitly looking back from a particular temporal vantage point to an earlier period. Recent experiences in the workplace are made sense of in relation to past ones (Andrews et al. 2006; McDowell 2013). Further, the former food sector workers become co-authors of our treatment of their own narratives (see Thomson 2011), of changes in themselves, in their expectations of work and employment, and in their ability to navigate employment options in the UK. The geography of food sector employment in the Peterborough city region, and the daily mobility it entails for many, was expressed vividly in Randy's refusal to consider work which would have meant him, as he saw it, going back to making daily trips out to rural areas.

Workplace oppression and inequalities remain part of this telling in all four cases. Maria voiced exasperation when she spoke of being deported, but Ana Rosa's narratives showed how workplace injustices were faced by people who did have the right to work as well. Engaging with the subjective experiences of working in the food sector in no way diminishes the vital work geographers and others are doing to reveal and respond to harsh workplace regimes. However, our emphasis on individual ways of telling means people, once food sector employees, emerge *as people*, not merely as workers. As Mann argues, such recognition of contingent selves with multiple subject positions should not 'lead to abandoning the site of class politics or to claiming that class is politically irrelevant' (2007: 154). Indeed, to refer back to the argument of Castree (2010) that we began with: labour geographers would do well to take more account of how individual people's workplace and other past experiences produce moral geographies. This article has shown that oral history can have a role to play here. This is about more than merely the creation of knowledge. It can also be about social change. As one veteran oral historian recalls: '[A]t Berkeley I brought labour organizers, farm workers, ex-prisoners, and Black Panthers to my classes to tell their histories... In the 1970s, oral history and autobiographical histories resonated in diverse social movements that incorporated voices from below and fought for their inclusion in the national narrative. As a result... "no-name people"

and “history’s etceteras”... emerged as flesh-and-blood people with all the quirks of humanity and a counter-narrative to tell’ (Platt 2013).

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