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Food, gender and refugee community moments: security and freedom?



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Abstract

This paper considers the cultural and symbolic significance of food for recently arrived refugees in the UK. Food-related spaces and practices can build social ties and uncover the dynamic interaction of delimited social spheres and imagined community. Although rarely considered in studies of refugees, food can elucidate the operation of community boundaries and the role of women in facilitating adaptation or 'integration'. Rather than being peripheral to the needs of refugees, this paper argues that food is central to community praxis and imaginings and is instructive for improving knowledge of how refugees cope and negotiate new environments.

Working with ethnographic material gathered in the context of the compulsory dispersal of asylum seekers to towns and cities around the UK, the paper describes how food provides identity markers for emerging refugee groups and positions food as a source of power through freedom in choice and security in familiarity. The argument that food is central to the creation of spaces of security is tempered by the need to recognise the potential for food to operate as a tool of

powerlessness or insecurity in the un-free environments of refugee reception facilities or exploitative domestic transactional arrangements.

Bio Note

Dr Hannah Lewis is Critical Geography Research Fellow at the School of Geography, University of Leeds, UK. Her research interests are in refugee community, immigration policy, contingent socialities, multiculturalism, and food. She recently completed an Economic and Social Research Council project, 'Precarious Lives', the first study of forced labour experiences among refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. The book based on this study, *Precarious Lives: Forced labour, Exploitation and Asylum* (H Lewis, P Dwyer, S Hodgkinson and L Waite) is forthcoming with Policy Press.

Dr Lewis's research track record spans academic, public policy and voluntary sector studies on 'new' migration, asylum seeker dispersal, the destitution of refused asylum seekers, and migrant and refugee integration, housing and volunteering. Her recent publications include essays in *Policy & Politics* (2013), *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2010) and a research report on forced labour and UK immigration policy (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2011).

When: Tuesday 17 September 2013

Time: 4.00pm to 5.30pm

Where: Room G467 Bld G Footscray Park

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