

María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia, ed. *Ex–sistere: Women’s Mobility in Contemporary Irish, Welsh, and Galician Literatures*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2016. Pp. x, 220. £47.99. ISBN: 978-1-4438-8700-7.

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Those literatures which have been developed alongside, or even technically within, powerful literary systems have usually been called peripheral literatures. This designation locates them in relation to the dominant canonical centrality, and the literatures may be in the same language, or another. Often challenging the allegedly accepted and consolidated official discourse of powerful literature and general culture, the peripheral view has led to significant changes in the interpretation of history.

A substantial portion of the peripheral perspective is being thought and written by women. For well-known reasons, women have often been relegated to a peripheral role in culture, if not directly silenced. Their literature is related to their existence, to their desire to survive, to their fight against the invisibility so often imposed on them. The title of the book reviewed here refers precisely to this relationship between literature and women’s existence. It is a compilation of critical literary essays in which the existence of women in certain Atlantic societies, peripheral to a greater or lesser degree, is analysed in detail. The collective focus is on women’s characteristic mobility throughout history, usually for domestic and economic reasons, and driven by the flow of diasporas specific to the territories of Ireland, Wales, and Galicia.

Travel is naturally inherent in human existence, although its accompanying travel literature has not always provided narratives of trauma and conflict nor the social and gendered discourses that challenge traditional kinds of travel literature that are often the case today. The literary works discussed in this book, however, contain these crucial aspects. Comparative analysis is the dominant critical approach informing the book, and the texts offer a peripheral view in two ways: first, by challenging the centrality of the discourse of tradition in parts of the world such as Europe, where this narrative is deeply rooted; and second, by challenging dominant male speech. The book manages to depict with great precision, and with an amazing profusion of details, a complex Atlantic

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scenario: a sentimental scene, but also an economic and political one where mobility stands as a new element that produces a manifold and enriching discourse. This discourse is based, as Lorenzo-Modia indicates, “on the transgression of patriarchal models of Western societies” (2).

A vital factor in this collection of essays is a critical study of the traditional roles that contributed to the demise of women in contemporary accounts of mobility, such as the fact of being relegated to the domestic realm, the area of privacy, so that they might bear the weight of all family responsibility. As Declan Kiberd notes in his excellent Foreword, emigration always produces significant changes in the lives of the people involved, but sometimes these changes can be used to discover “exhilarating new forms of freedom” (x). The tension between their native land and the adoptive one, or between the old and the new, refers back directly to the concept of identity, a fundamental concept in all the essays compiled in this book.

The volume includes ten essays of different natures, including two creative writing texts. Nevertheless, a thematic coherence is evident, with a focus on the central theme announced in the title (the mobility of women in the peripheral communities of the Atlantic area, i.e. the impact of the diaspora on women's existence, and the construction of feminine identity and its reflection in literature). The first four texts in the volume refer to Galician literature. Emigration has been persistent in Galicia, and has had a great influence on the economic and social structure, particularly in the early years of the twentieth century. Strictly speaking, we could say that emigration is a fundamental element in the construction of Galician identity. The reflection of the diaspora in Galician literature is abundant, starting with Galicia's national poet, Rosalía de Castro, who wrote in the early modern period of Galician literature, i.e. during the Cultural Renaissance (Rexurdimento, 1863-1880).

In her essay entitled, “Women's Mobility in Contemporary Galician Literature: From ‘Widows of the living’ to ‘I too wish to navigate’,” María López Sánchez analyses the presence of women in the construction of the Galician identity through the geographic space and the diasporic scenario from the late nineteenth century onwards. Sánchez considers essential the union of the concepts of identity and native ground in Rosalía de Castro, from which springs the idea of a female Galicia as opposed to a more masculine Galicia located in the area of Bergantiños by the poet Eduardo Pondal, a bard deeply influenced by Celtic cultures. Sánchez, in his analysis of Rosalía, sees women as guardians of memory in a time when “it was mainly Galician men who migrated, while women stayed in the homeland” (11). This article deals chronologically with the relationship between women and the Galician diaspora in a comprehensive and

precise manner. Sández emphasizes the relevance of Rosalía de Castro's early interest in emigration issues and their impact on the Galician society: "The two key elements of Rosalía de Castro's approach to mass migration are a reflection on the effects of migration on Galicia's own culture and a sensibility towards the gender issues at stake in the process of migration" (12).

The construction of a territory through the relationship between land and gender continues with references to the "We" (*Nós*) generation, which addressed the Atlantic communities and particularly Ireland. The "We" (*Nós*) generation implies a change in the migration concept, which became more intellectualized at this time. This analysis begins with Otero Pedrayo in *Arredor de si* (Around oneself), and continues with the deconstruction of the myth of Penelope through the mobility of young contemporary Galician writers who build a new territorial identity by reflecting their travel experiences in their artistic work. Here the author analyses not only the current migration process as a cultural problem (the so-called brain drain), but also the literary output that unites the issues of space and woman, mainly by again using the myth of Penelope in the works of such authors as Díaz Castro and Xohana Torres. This deconstruction allows Sández to focus very effectively on current texts of well-known writers, from María Reimóndez to Rosa Aneiros, from Teresa Moure to Begoña Caamaño, from Blanca Novoneyra to López Silva, from Yolanda Castaño to Olga Novo, among others.

In the second essay involving Galician literature entitled "Naming the Foreign: External Toponymy in Galician Poetry Written by Women (2000-2014)," María Xesús Nogueira offers a very detailed account of the use of geographical names by some Galician contemporary writers. The importance of place names is proverbial in literature, particularly in building spaces of identity or territories which can be assimilated into what the Irish have always called "native ground" or the realm of "sense of place." There is a whole poetic tradition around the toponymic interpretation of the landscape, either when building spaces of identity or when applied to the political use of the landscape. There is a very strong tradition of the so-called "place-name poems," especially in Irish literature. This is the context analysed in detail by Nogueira, which begins with biographical experience as a source of foreign place names in poetry. Nogueira shows that urban references are the most common foreign place names appearing in the most recent poets' work, perhaps, she argues, as a "reaction against the proliferation of poetics which reformulate the topos of the rural world" (40). Nogueira provides very specific details when dealing with texts and paratexts, including poets like María do Cebreiro or Chus Pato, Yolanda Castaño or Dores Tembrás. In all of them, the geographical discourse attains considerable relevance.

Olivia Rodríguez-González devotes her article to the figure of Eva Moreda, born in the village of A Veiga (Lugo) in 1981. Her birthplace is relevant because new spatial factors, i.e. geographical ones, combine with the element of time in order to build a concrete and changing reality, which finally explains the journey and evolution of the protagonists. Rodríguez-González focuses her analysis on one of the most versatile and interesting literary concepts developed by Bakhtin, the chronotope, which has been sometimes applied, for example, to Irish literature and to Seamus Heaney's poetry in particular. Rodríguez-González manages to construct a critical artefact of great interest, whose main object is a short novel published in 2011, *A Veiga é como un tempo distinto* (La Veiga is like a different time). Here the different chapters are named after various London neighbourhoods, including Portobello Road, Oxford Street, and Croydon. The story centres on Elisa and Gelo, two Galician-speaking protagonists born in the hard years of Franco's regime. The story revolves around the spatiotemporal relationship between A Veiga, their birthplace, and their final destination as emigrants, London, which is a very common destination for Galician emigrants from coastal areas. The big city is, of course, the transforming agent and the place where a feeling of vulnerability may also appear.

The chapters devoted to Galician literature close with an excellent and exciting autobiographical text by Xesús Fraga ("Virtudes and Isabel: Two Galician Women in London"), a text in which, maintaining the narrative tension and focusing on his direct experience, Fraga narrates his own London origin and the lives of some migrant women in his family. The confessional, ironic, and humorous tone on many occasions gives way to a strong feeling that encompasses complicities present and past in a way that transmits to the reader, with great accuracy, the true value of memory. That memory is domestic, and illuminates the text with a sense of nostalgia which does not mean defeat, except for the inevitability of death.

The chapters about Irish literature deal with different mobility models and different interpretations of spaces and geographies inhabited by women. They are approximations of travel and movement, and in many cases remarkably unique and not very well-known. A good example of this is the first one, a critical essay by José Francisco Fernández on the figure of Honor Tracy (an English travel writer born in the early twentieth century, whose real name was Lilibush Wingfield). José Francisco Fernández moves, to be sure, in a territory he knows well: the life and work of the famous writer and scholar Gerald Brenan. Taking these elements into account, Fernández depicts an accurate portrait of Honor Tracy, a woman who belonged to the circle of Gerald Brenan and his wife's closest friends in Málaga. Tracy certainly deserved more attention

than she has received so far, not only in the Anglo-Saxon context but in the Hispanic context as well. At the end of his article, Fernández points out that the vision of travel literature that the pioneer Honor Tracy possessed “serves to confirm stereotypes instead of challenging a monolithic vision of other places and cultures” (108). Fernández concludes that Tracy did not feel very comfortable writing about territories such as Galicia and Ireland, where confirming her expectations from her evidently colonial perspective was not as easy as in Castile, because both Galicia and Ireland demanded “to be measured in their own terms” (108).

In the next chapter, María Dolores González Penas and María Amelia Fraga Fuentes discuss two of the most recurrent issues in this book: identity and migration. Their critical essay deals with a play written by Christina Reid, a Protestant playwright from Northern Ireland, who writes about her experience within a historical framework that is recognizably traumatic. The authors note that Anthony Roche has emphasized some similarities between Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup* (1983) and the well-known and essential *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) by the great Irish playwright Brian Friel. These similarities may strike us as quite significant because they concern precisely two elements common to the essays compiled in this book: both plays are related to personal memoirs, and women play a fundamental role in both. Of course, as the authors point out, the plot takes place in a rural and Catholic context in the case of Friel, whereas in Reid’s play the action occurs in Belfast, an urban and conflict-ridden setting with a palpable tension between the Protestant and Catholic communities. The significance of the private sphere in areas of political conflict is profusely analysed. This is perhaps because it is one of Reid’s favourite themes. For instance, the “house” is interpreted as a protective concept in part because we are presented with a fractured family but also because the public sphere of women’s lives (a challenging area for the traditional powers) takes place here. The identity of Beth, the protagonist, becomes a central element because it is moulded by different events in her life. Beth tends to be greatly influenced by her context and personal relations: “above all within her family and with her Catholic friend Theresa Duffy” (113). In Reid’s play, identity is built on several key aspects, including the discourse about family relationships, the need to earn social respectability, generational differences, and the struggle against stereotypes (a central theme in *Tea in a China Cup* represented largely by teenager Shauna, Theresa’s daughter, who never appears onstage). Identity is also built on emigration and the historical complexities derived from the place she lives in. Reid addresses the political and religious complexity openly, seeking spaces for mutual understanding, as in the case of Beth and Theresa.

María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia, who has written significant studies on Irish literature, and in particular on the poet Medbh McGuckian, explores in her critical essay a crucial element in the context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland: the Irish resistance. Again, religious and political factors emerge in Medbh McGuckian's literary defiance, which constitutes a very real act of rebellion. The poet prefers to build up her position against the hostile reality in the territory of art and language, her favourite weapons. Lorenzo-Modia emphasizes women's insubordination, even if it is symbolic, because it takes place in the public sphere, as demonstrated by Medbh McGuckian, a writer of extraordinary relevance. The value of this female challenge is that it confronts the common myth of the subversive male writing in exile, which Joyce largely exemplifies. Lorenzo-Modia emphasizes the importance of undermining the traditional image of woman confined to her family and private territory, but, above all, insists on woman's vindication in places of conflict, here represented by McGuckian as "an emblem of conscious action against the Irish paralysis of both personal resistance and political resilience" (137). McGuckian's linguistic and conceptual difficulty in her poetry inhabited by dark and implacable suggestions is not only a celebration of literary and pictorial tradition, but also an act of creation. Her work uses a beautiful though hard outer covering to prevent entering the pain and to protect those who are in the midst of a traumatic experience -to help them not leave their land, not expatriate culture.

Lorenzo-Modia focuses on a significant poem, "The Marcella Quilt," which serves as a model of these ideas of resistance. But beyond the socio-political discourse, Lorenzo-Modia offers a profound analysis of McGuckian's literary qualities, dealing with the reasons for her peculiar syntax and abundant intertextuality as well as the reasons for her "patchwork" art. It all contributes to the creation of a new poetic existence, to the reinvention of the nature of both public and private lives in territories of conflict. Everything contributes, in short, to building the new reality constructed with pieces from different sources -a fragmented reality represented by this poetic "quilt," which Lorenzo-Modia considers an imitation of the Provençal fabrics of Marseille, made by mid-eighteenth century English weavers. There are many other references to be gleaned from this revealing poem and all are acutely analysed in this comprehensive article. The verse "we are what we borrow" serves to summarize a peculiar feeling of paralysis: the historical pain of Irish women dispossessed of their language, of their country, even of their own bodies. As Lorenzo-Modia demonstrates, in McGuckian's poetry resistance is encapsulated in a shell that is simultaneously delicate and hard, like a brave and defiant, patriotic Irish woman.

The critical essays on Irish literature conclude with an inspiring contribution by Manuela Palacios. This comprises, as she says, "a number of

descriptions by Irish female writers of photographs depicting migrating women” (154). The author’s research career is rich in approaches to literature written by women, mainly of Irish and Galician poetry. Her contributions in this area have been quite revealing in recent years, facilitating the dissemination and recognition of many contemporary Irish and Galician women poets, especially through translation. This time, however, her approach is much more concerned with the intersection of visual and plastic representations in literature. Her personal knowledge of the lives of many contemporary poets who include emigration among their common literary themes makes her approach quite innovative and relevant. Paula Meehan, Rita Kelly, Céilia de Fréine, Evelyn Conlon, Lorna Shaughnessy, Máighréad Medbh, Catherine Phil MacCarthy, Mary O’Donnell, and Lia Mills write about the different photographs and their texts are followed by an elaborate and contextualized discussion. Moreover, the photographs reproduced here contain a high sociological value, not just at a personal level but also from the point of view of a collective experience. Undoubtedly, as Palacios states, both the photographs and the accompanying texts help fill a void in the history of women’s migration (often plunged into a dense silence, a silence imposed and even sometimes self-imposed). Of course, there are ethical reasons justifying the publication of these texts, but there is also a relatively high degree of public interest supporting it.

In the final part of this book, Welsh literature on migration and women’s mobility is analysed in two essays. The first is written by Kevin Mills and offers a thorough analysis of mobile identities as they appear in Nikita Lalwani first novel, *Gifted*. With great clarity and literary richness, the novel reveals the many unresolved tensions between those characters who find themselves in the territory of personal discomfort as a result of having left India to settle in Cardiff. Indeed, Cardiff and India are, as Kevin Mills points out, the two poles which define the many cultural differences derived from the protagonists’ life experiences. The impossibility of adapting their native culture to the new one and the constant presence of Mother India in the background of their domestic lives, provoke a situation that seems increasingly oppressive. As Kevin Mills argues, the process of cultural alienation caused by mobility is a central element in Nikita Lalwani’s novel, which includes reflections on personal conflicts, emotional problems, and family confrontations. Mills explains, in a very precise way, the struggle for identity depicted through the evolution of the main characters, referring to authors such as Homi Bhabha to justify the context for *Gifted* and why identity issues are so recurrent in postcolonial literature.

In a once more personal and autobiographical vein, the book closes with a collection of texts by the poet Chris Kinsey. These deal with themes of mobility, migration and household search, and explore the relationship between family

members, space and people, and especially nature and human beings. They genuinely complete the enriching experience of having read this volume. This book provides a miscellany of insights into the female universe and its relation to geographical mobility in contexts traditionally considered as peripheral. The articles collected here aim to establish a dialogue between the past and the present, showing the changing role of women in the context of emigration, cultural negotiations, as well as the influence of new life patterns, the development of multiple identities, and the conflicts provoked by the passage from the private sphere into the public.

In summary, this book contributes in a very stimulating fashion to the construction of a personal and cultural history of mobility from the female perspective in the so-called peripheral Atlantic spaces. Beyond a doubt, it will prove of considerable value to researchers and students of these regional literatures.