Transamerican Readings of Diasporic Irish Parentage

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore and analyse the ways in which 'Irishness' in the literatures of the Caribbean and Latin America is represented and performed in a relatively broad corpus of literary works. To this end I discuss four fictional texts, Francisco Goldman's *The Divine Husband*, Erna Brodber's *Myal*, Zoé Valdés' *I Gave You All I Had* and Roldfo Walsh's *Irish boys after a cat*, which, when reading their respective Irish characters from a transamerican approach, seem to establish a paradigm of classic stereotypical representations of the diasporic Irish mothers and fathers and 'Irishness'. I therefore elaborate upon theories of diaspora space and offer my understanding of literary 'figures' to observe and comment on the problematic outcomes of such representations. I argue that the perceived paradigm among these texts subsequently allows for further studies of their principal characters who are the hybrid offspring of diasporic Irish parent figures.

Key words: Irishness, diaspora, transamerican, figure, stererotypes

Introduction and framework

"No experience has been more native to Ireland than leaving it" Terry Eagleton whimsically remarks in his *The Truth about the Irish* (Eagleton 1999: 105). Resulting from centuries of diaspora, there has arisen a perceptible strain on the ideologies of identity and belonging in the Irish community. Frank Manista, for example, strongly questions what it means to be Irish in the world now and who determines the meaning of being "Irish" (Manista 2006: 268). This is evidenced further as the Irish appear as part of the

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national and fictional imaginaries of numerous countries in the Caribbean and Latin America. However, as Laura Zuntini de Izarra states, "Irish immigration to South America [and the Caribbean] has been studied from few historical perspectives and very little has been done to trace contemporary Irish literary diasporic voices in this geographical location" (Zuntini de Izarra 137: 2001). Indeed, in order to "trace" these Irish voices of representation we must begin with "Irish readings" of texts that may not immediately seem to lend themselves to such a distinct and highly specialised analytical approach. To allow for this type of broader reading and comparative analysis I incorporate what Ariana Vigil calls a 'transamerican[2]' approach to literature which "privileges the realm of thought and creativity" (Vigil 2013: 193). Vigil expands upon Ralph Bauer's notions of 'American hemispheric studies'[3] by looking past more limited regional interactions to those which represent transamerican spaces and transnational individuals "whose lives form an experiential region within which singularly delineated notions of political, social and cultural identity do not suffice".[4] Such a "cosmopolitan polyglot way of working with literature" (Gillman 2008: 329) permits comparative, cross-cultural and multilingual readings of fictional literature with more extensive implications in the fields of both literary and Irish studies. My transamerican readings and discussion of the diasporic Irish address how specifically diaspora has influenced in the construction of a more extensive definition and representation of Irish identity or 'Irishness'. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that "identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation (Hall 1997: 4). Thus, I underscore and highlight the function of these representations as performances in terms of diasporic Irish identity. To this end, I read these diasporic identities in what Avtar Brah calls "diaspora space" which hosts "not only...diasporic subjects but equally...those who are constructed and represented as 'indigenous'" (Brah 1996: 16). In order to comment on the diasporic Irish in terms of a paradigmatic literary category, I emphasize the role of these individuals as 'dislocated' subjects whose identity has been constructed from new '(dis)locations' and various attempts at enmeshing themselves with those represented as "indigenous" or "Others". Similarly Peter Childs reminds us that, "diasporic identities work at other levels than those marked by

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[2] Vigil as well notes that, in contrast to "hemispheric frameworks" which are "often linked to developments toward continental integration under NAFTA", the "transamerican approach can better account for non-state-sanctioned interactions" (ibid).

[3] The "hemispheric turn" in American literature, as Ralph Bauer claims, "has manifested itself in virtually all the subdisciplines of American literary and cultural studies" (Bauer 2008: 235). This is to say that 'American' no longer represents the United States-centered imperialist mode of study but rather it now seeks to include Caribbean and Latin American cultures and literatures within a single yet broader field of study.

[4] Moya, P.M.L. and R. Saldívar, *Fictions of the Trans-American Imaginary*, Modern Fiction Studies, Baltimore, 2003, cited in A. Vigil, *The Divine Husband and the creation of a transamericana subject*, New York, Latino Studies, 2013, pg. 193.

national boundaries" (Childs 2002: 52). Like Brah within her concept of diaspora space, I too see several important insights that Gloria Anzaldúa's theorisation of *borderlands* and, more specifically of its inhabitants, can provide this study (Brah 1996: 198). Anzaldúa proposes that these individuals are "the prohibited and forbidden…the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome…the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal"" (Anzaldúa 1987: 25). Many of these fundamental characteristics of *borderlands* subjects are paralleled in the "hostile depictions of the Gaelic Irish as uncivilized" (Garner 2004: 72) which go as far back as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[5] More recently, Hellen Kelly has approached such representations of the diasporic Irish in terms of 'deviancy'. She claims that "'deviancy' in its variant forms has become, therefore, the most accessible and fruitful approach to assessing levels of integration amongst Irish immigrant communities" (Kelly 2009: 128). Amongst the categories she assesses we find "mental health, disorder, crime and, above all, drunkenness" (ibid). These, along with other deviancies like infidelity, unruliness and immorality, have perpetuated a negative concept of the diasporic Irish as non-functional members of society and, more importantly here, as errant parents.

Trying to 'figure' out the Irish

Additionally, it is important to define briefly my concept of the term 'figure' which I understand as a multifaceted category with relevance to my readings of the diasporic Irish. My specific use of 'figure' is informed by the Random House online English dictionary, which in the twenty-second entry defines it as a "phantasm or illusion". Even though this definition is rather archaic and has fallen into disuse, it is still possible to assert that the word 'figure' can represent an entity that exists in two worlds, that of the living and that of the dead, and in neither at the same time. Concordantly, in Spanish the word '*figura*' (literally 'figure') is defined by the DRAE[6] in the fifth entry as a "thing which represents or signifies another".[7] As such, a 'figure' can be understood as indeterminate, nearly imperceptible yet present or, 'phantasmagorically' betwixt. Bearing this in mind, I underscore this phantom like displacement as analogous to the fundamental elements of diasporic subjects and/or *borderlands* inhabitants. I therefore consider this 'figuring' of the diasporic Irish as a vital correlative factor in my reading of them from a transamerican perspective.

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[5] As Jill Sheppard notes, during their initial displacement to Barbados in the mid-seventeenth century "the trouble they caused the authorities in the next few decades" (Sheppard 1977: 12) was the criterion for their status as disruptive and unruly.

[6] "Diccionario de la Real Academia Española" or the *Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy*, the definitive authority on the Spanish language.

[7] "Cosa que representa o significa otra".

Diasporic Irish Parentage; a paradigm of deviance and absence

Using the aforementioned theoretical framework I offer my analyses of four fictional texts: Francisco Goldman's *The Divine Husband*, Erna Brodber's *Myal*, Zoé Valdés' *I Gave You All I Had* (*Te di la vida entera*[8]) and Rodolfo Walsh's *Irish boys after a cat* (*Iralndeses detrás de un gato*).[9] I have ordered the list in this fashion to examine in tandem the two works written in English which portray Irish fathers against two texts originally written in Spanish that depict Irish mothers. Each author employs the diasporic Irish figure paradigmatically in the role of parent to the respective protagonist in their work, therefore, I argue that these representations are intrinsically linked to stereotypical or stock concepts of 'Irishness'. Through my transamerican readings I ask; "In what ways have the diasporic Irish as parents been represented in fiction throughout the Caribbean and Latin America?" However, what can transamerican readings or, more specifically, "reading the Irish" reveal about these individuals that would otherwise remain unexamined and inappreciable? What role does 'Irishness' play in their representations by each author? I look to demonstrate that despite differences of each author's nationality and cultural/temporal context, the Irish characters they have created are imagined as objectionable, morally deviant figures whose presence replicates an unfavourable, stereotypical and grim portrait of the diasporic Irish figure.

Diasporic Irish Fathers

Declan Kiberd, in his chapter on *Fathers and Sons: Irish-Style*, detects a leitmotif of the "unreliable, inadequate or absent" Irish fathers in the works of "second-rate" Irish writers in their representations of Irish father-son relations (Kiberd 1995: 127-130). It would seem, however, that this leitmotif has become more a paradigm in the transamerican context, one not limited to the writings of Irish authors nor strictly to Irish fathers and sons but one that also informs non-Irish authors' writings on Irish fathers and their hybrid offspring. Goldman's epic novel, *The Divine Husband*, portrays an Irish-American father Timothy Moran whose "surname apparently revealed [his] Irish origin" (Goldman 2004: 122). Traveling from New York to Guatemala circa 1860, his diasporic Irishness is represented as 'troublesome' and breaking with the confines of the 'normal', which simultaneously demonstrates his 'abnormal' and reprehensible behaviour:

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[8] All citations and references to Valdés' work are taken from the English version translated by Nadia Benabid, 1999. For the original Spanish version see: Valdés, Zoé, *Te di la vida entera* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1996).

[9] All translations of Walsh's text are mine. For original Spanish text see corresponding endnotes.

> "So Timothy Moran had fallen in love with an Indita...over whom [he] lost his head and heart and even, one could say, eventually his life...By his scandalous behaviour in Amatitlán, Timothy Moran had turned his wife, Elsa, into the subject of awful ridicule and humiliation. Having abandoned her in the most public way, he was spied going about everywhere with his pretty little aborigine, who was soon pregnant. Just days after the infant girl was born, Mrs. Elsa Moran committed suicide...the mood in the town turned violent against Mr. Moran. Many of the white foreigners and criollos vowed to kill him, in order to make an example of him. So Timothy Moran and his family fled, not immediately into the mountains but to Mazatenango...until the truth caught up with him and then he did flee into the mountains" (Goldman 2004: 181-182).

An '*atravesado*'[10], Moran crosses borders and is continually persecuted by "white foreigners and criollos" because he exemplifies the deviant, disturbing comportment so readily associated with the Irish. In exile while "intending to start a coffee farm [and having] barely even begun to clear the land" he is abruptly killed "from a mule kick to the stomach" (Goldman 2004: 19). His morbid or, for some, ironically just dismissal from the novel reproduces the traditional "anti-Irish prejudice" of which Michael Hayes warns (Hayes 2006: 82). Subsequently, it is only through his daughter's, María de las Nieves, vague recollections and dialogues with other characters that Moran and his 'Irishness' continue to appear throughout the narrative in vilifying terms. In one instance she is explicitly asked by Mack Chinchilla, one of her love interests, about her father who she claims is "a New York Irishman...of some sort of another" (Goldman 2004: 311) despite recalling earlier that "he'd been born in New York, he was a Yankee" (Goldman 2004: 122). In response Mack "would repress his [negative] feelings about the Irish of New York" (Goldman 2004: 311), something which Goldman's incarnation of Cuban poet José Martí does not. He aims his animosity of the Irish at a "red-haired, bloody-kneed walker, who keeps falling because he is more asleep than awake, poor man, he is surely Irish." This prompts him to inquire if Moran was "a black-haired Irishman, or a red-haired" to which María de las Nieves replies, "castaño, or chestnut, and Martí said, "The red-haired ones tend to be the roughest"" (Goldman 2004: 445). Though his novel is, as Vigil suggests, quite readable as "transamerican literature" because it merges voices from North and South, Anglo and Latino (Vigil 2013: 191), Goldman clearly replicates the unchanging stereotypes of the

[10] Term used by Anzaldúa in her discussion of *borderlands* subjects meaning a "troublemaker" or "one who crosses". Translation mine.

Irish and stocks Moran's character with "other personal artefacts, [such as] a burlap sack filled with bottles of Irish whiskey" (Goldman 2004: 19). Moran ostensibly exemplifies what is known as an "Irish Traveller" or "tinker" (Harper 1973: 101-102). These ""Irish Travellers" or "tinkers" immigrated to the United States in the 1840's escaping the starvation of the Irish Potato Famine…settled in upstate New York…[and] moved south where they specialized in horse and mule trading" (ibid). From a broader view, Goldman arguably reproduces what Hayes asserts is "the negative stereotyping of Irish Travellers which became dominant in the public discourse of the latter part of the twentieth century in particular can arguably be viewed as an extension of a deeply inculcated anti-Irish tradition, a more extreme version of the anti-Irish "Othering" tradition which existed during the centuries of British colonization" (2006: 82). Hence, Moran, under this reading, reaffirms centuries-old stereotypes in two distinct diaspora spaces, Guatemala and New York, while concurrently existing as an 'in-between figure' in his daughter's obscured memories.

Through *Myal*, principally set in Morant Bay, Jamaica from1913-20, Brodber offers us "Ralston O'Grady, one of those Irish police officers whose presence the authorities must have felt, kept the natives from eating each other" and his daughter Ella, protagonist of the novel; the "half black, half white child… the poor little pickney" (Brodber 1988: 6-7). From the beginning of the narrative "poor pink O'Grady, dissonant as a skinned bull" (ibid) shows signs of falling into the stereotypical paradigm, like Moran, as an immoral and soon-to-be absent father. Quickly Mary Riley, his Jamaican housekeeper and "wife's…belly drew attention to O'Grady. He and it became a sign of misbehaving Irish policemen and O'Grady was transferred to where Mary knew not" (Brodber 1988: 8). Yet, as Shalini Puri elucidates, the events in O'Grady's life are narrated in the passive voice which implies a lack of authorship by O'Grady over his own actions which "are inscribed in a larger text" (Puri 1993: 105). Just as with Moran, O'Grady is portrayed as incapable of controlling his 'sexual whims' and is punished for breaking social and moral norms. His "misbehaving" and improprieties with a 'savage local' are deemed 'perverse' and morally inexcusable. Within the diaspora space of Jamaica under English colonial administration, as Puri points out, "O'Grady is not absolutely powerful: indeed his Irishness limits his position...to one of functionary" (ibid). Similar to Moran, O'Grady's judgment falls upon him from other "whites", namely the British. Deepika Bahri comments on the racialization of the Irish by the English and impels us to consider the "difference of the difference" in terms of their "whiteness" (Bahri 2003: 61). For Bahri, the concept of "whiteness" as defined by the colonial British served as a categorical tool with which to separate themselves from the Irish and justify oppressive and imperialistic acts and reforms upon them. Bahri exemplifies this point by elucidating several difference indicators commonly used on the Irish: language, behaviour, or visual

markers unrelated to colour such as their "bad habits", like laziness and drunkenness, and "lifestyle", meaning poverty and "mischievous practices" (ibid). This type of pseudo-racialized discourse sought not only to emphasize the righteousness of the conquest of a clearly 'inferior' race but also to perpetuate pre-established negative stereotypes of the Irish. In assessing Brodber's novel Ulrike Erichsen attests to the contrary that "Brodber very deliberately avoids setting up any of the well-known binaries like…colonizer/colonized" and therefore evades as well "the trap of racial stereotyping" (Erichsen 2002: 90). However, by not considering O'Grady's 'Irishness' in a larger cultural context and taking into account the long tradition of stereotypical representations of the Irish, is not the opposite exactly what has happened? Has Brodber simply imitated the negative English colonial discourse of the Irish via O'Grady within a new diaspora space? We can also question if Goldman has recurred to similar stock representations of the 'unwanted Irish Travellers' to construct Moran. Because O'Grady is swiftly removed from the narrative, as a 'figured' Irish parent he becomes irrevocably equated to a symbol of abandonment and absence. For him, further exile is the only resolution to his disruptive presence; for Moran it is death. As such, both are 'figured' as initially present then quickly evanescent. Like Moran who, along with his 'Irishness', continued to exist as an ambiguous phantom in María de las Nieves' memories, O'Grady is as well recalled in distorted terms. During her time in Baltimore, Ella modifies elements of her father's past and tells Selwyn, her husband, that he "succumbed to a tropical disease" (Brodber 1988: 43). In erasing her father's scandalous conduct Ella rewrites O'Grady's story (along with her mother's and her own[11]). Now resembling even more Moran, O'Grady is re-imagined as the victim of an untimely demise and rendered 'half-dead' (alive in her reality yet dead in her imaginary), therefore enhancing his phantasmagoric state.

Diasporic Irish Mothers

Given their eerily similar representations, Moran and O'Grady both embody diasporic Irish fathers as invariably deviant and absent when read against one another. Yet, can the same be said for diasporic Irish mothers? How do they 'figure' into this paradigm of diasporic Irish parentage? The leitmotifs or clichés of Irish fathers elucidated by Kiberd suggest that those of Irish mothers would have little or no similarity. Indeed, the cliché of the "over-intense, clutching relationship between mother-and-son" (Kiberd 1992: 127) in Irish literature, as he puts it, shares little with the relationships of diasporic Irish mothers and their offspring in transamerican readings save one commonality: Kiberd underscores that Irish "women sought from their sons an emotional fulfilment denied them

[11] Ella lies that her mother is Irish, not Jamaican, thus making herself "to be full Irish girl" (Brodber 1988: 43).

by their men, and that suggests that their husbands had failed as lovers" (Kiberd 1992: 129). It is not so much in the search for 'emotional fulfilment by their sons' that we shall find a point of comparison with diasporic Irish mothers but in the failure of their husbands as lovers and the consequences of their often dissolute pursuits for emotional fulfilment from unfamiliar 'others' which results in the negation and abandonment of their children.

Valdés' novel, *I gave you all I had*, presents the protagonist Cuca or simply known as "the Girl," (Valdés 1999: 3-4) whose mother is a "Dubliner by birth [who] left that city when she was two" (ibid). Cuca's maternal grandparents are also Irish immigrants, much like 'Irish Travellers', that "had come to Cuba with…high hopes of making a killing in the horse meat trade" (ibid). Although the author offers a brief yet selectively detailed migratory family history emphasizing her Irish heritage[12], she conspicuously omits many particulars of Cuca's mother, her name most strikingly. By referring to her only as 'Cuca's mother', Valdés veils her in nameless anonymity which she attempts to offset by employing in her figure stereotypical diasporic Irish elements and behaviour; "Her [Cuca's] lady mother — she of the stormy red hair and the sea blue eyes — felt compelled to resume her forgettable career as an actress or a soliloquist. She ditched her Chinese husband, the Girl's father, took up with an eighteen-year-old, and bade them all a good out-of-sight, out-of-mind" (ibid). Like Moran and O'Grady, Cuca's mother is equally unable to suppress her own sexual desires and yields to them. However, her morally deviant sexuality seems to stem from different motives. Though under highly scrupulous circumstances, both Moran and O'Grady do become devote spouses until they are 'disappeared' and 'figured' into spectral entities. Thus, any motive for their departures comes from the external and is not self-enacted. Conversely, as previously noted, the Irish mother would seek emotional fulfilment due to a deficiency in her husband, meaning her motives are developed internally and manifested outwardly. As a diasporic Irish figure, Cuca's mother looks to realize herself outside the familial sphere by chasing after her self-indulged fantasies, both professional and sexual. In abandoning her family she demonstrates active control over her actions while also rejecting her functionary title as 'Cuca's mother' in search of an identity as an inimitable individual. Her decision to go through the 'confines of the normal' is a conscious one which shifts her into the realm of the betwixt and flickering. The impact of such a sudden and jolting withdrawal reverberates in Cuca who is left "lavishly hungry for affection. A mother's love most of all" (Valdés 1999: 8). To this point Nanne Timmer emphasizes that in many of Valdés' works "the

[12] The reader is only told that Cuca's father is a "Chinese cook, [who] had journeyed from Canton to Mexico. There he changed his name and traveled on to Cuba to strike it rich" (Valdés 1999: 3).

identification with, and separation from, the mother is crucial" (Timmer 2013: 198). As we have evidenced in Moran and O'Grady, the diasporic Irish figure necessarily passes into a phantasmagoric state, only to have their 'Irishness' haunt and confound their offspring's lives in various manners. The one lasting remnant of her mother's 'Irishness' is alluded to in Cuca's "way of sashaying down a street...bobbing back and forth between Irish passion and Oriental patience" (Valdés 1999: 36). It is not in her-own words or memories but rather through the omniscient narrative voice that her mother's 'Irish passion' lives on within her. Expressed is this way, Cuca is unaware of this shadowy trace of "Irishness', which is all that remains of this nameless diasporic Irish mother.

The first story in Walsh's "Irish series", *Irish boys after a cat*, presents a young boy known as El Gato (the Cat) whose mother is originally from Cork. Nonetheless, we are only privy to her surname; O'Hara. The lack of a first name serves to 'figure' her as incomplete, only "half-here", though slightly more 'complete' than Cuca's unnamed mother but equally betwixt. Similar to Cuca's mother, O'Hara deserts her child by leaving him at a Catholic school for poor Irish children and Irish orphans. "Upon bringing him she gave birth to him for a second time, cutting the bloodless umbilical cord like dry a branch, she got him off her back forever" (Walsh 1965: 88).[13] She then becomes "without explanation…the whore of the town, but a pious whore, a true Catholic whore…" (Walsh 1965: 91-92).[14] Like Moran and Cuca's mother, O'Hara is guilty of infidelity, allowing the memory of her husband to be "trampled by the men that followed" (ibid).[15] Again, it is promiscuity which violently ruptures the family. As Walsh "penetrates the most nightmarish zones of violence" [16] (Lago 1991: 61), both physical and mental, he maintains focus on the brutal nature of the Irish mother-hybrid son relationship. Although El Gato shows some grief while his mother separates herself from him, he later, without any affection, openly labels his mother "a whore" (ibid). As David Viñas points out, O'Hara is illustrative of "the blurry mothers… (those which are loved and shitted upon)" [17] (Viñas 2005: 171) who are often present in Walsh's stories. Curious, then, that Moran, O'Grady and Cuca's mother as well could all fit into this category of blurred 'figures', once loved but now muddied in shame because of their deviant and

[13] "…que al traerlo lo paría por segunda vez, cortaba un ombligo incruento y seco como una rama, y se lo sacaba de encima para siempre".

[14] "…sin explicación, se volvió la puta del pueblo, pero una puta piadosa, una verdadera puta católica...".

[15] "…su memoria pisoteada por los hombres que siguieron…".

[16] "…Walsh cale en las zonas más pesadillescas de la violencia".

[17] "…las madres borrosas…(a las que se ama y en las que se caga)".

immoral behaviour. Now phased into absence, O'Hara's 'Irishness', like that of the other three diasporic Irish parents, has become a looming element in El Gato's understanding of himself and the diasporic Irish in general. As he is about to meet "the people of his race [his classmates], the one to which his father did not belong and to which his mother was nothing more than a discarded thread. He feared them intensely, like he feared himself" (Walsh 1965: 89).[18] Due to the fact that O'Hara has seemingly been cast out from the Irish community, the residual 'Irishness' in her son is a damaged commodity. The fear that takes hold of El Gato is the symbolic result of the waywardness of his mother which creates the inability for her son to comprehend and embrace his Irish heritage. Since O'Hara is a diasporic 'figure', any meaningful link for El Gato to his 'Irishness' is deeply frustrated by the illusory substance of her character. In sum, O'Hara, like Moran, O'Grady and Cuca's mother, is written into a *borderland* which is defined by these diasporic Irish, the 'troublesome' and 'half-dead' who exist purely as ones who are remembered because they are impossible to be forgotten.

Conclusions

'Irishness' in the literary works discussed in this study has been represented as a confluence of stereotypical elements that are readily recognizable and would seem to persist from both within and without these diasporic Irish figures. I have demonstrated that their depictions necessarily reflect sexual and moral deviance, resulting in compulsory absence. Consequently, each diasporic Irish figure is transformed into a "phantasmagoric" entity, leaving behind only vague hints of 'Irishness' in their respective hybrid offspring. I have claimed that there exists an overarching paradigm among these representations of the diasporic Irish despite their relatively brief and minor roles in each narrative. These findings open the possibility of further analyses of the Irish offspring protagonists in the texts discussed here, exploring how 'Irishness' echoes in their representations.

[18] "…la gente de su raza, a la que su padre no pertenecía, y de la que su madre no era más que una hebra descartada. Les temía intensamente, como se temía a sí mismo…".

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