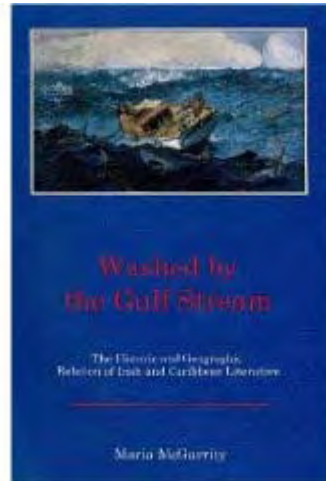


Reviews

Maria McGarrity's *Washed By The Gulf Stream. The Historic and Geographic Relation of Irish and Caribbean Literature*

By Mariana Bolfarine (1)



McGarrity, Maria. *Washed by the Gulf Stream. The Historic and Geographic Relation of Irish and Caribbean Literature*. University of Delaware Press, 2008. 196 p. ISBN: 978-0-87413-028-7

Washed by the Gulf Stream is a comparative analysis that tackles modern literary manifestations of Ireland and the Caribbean. The author focuses on three main themes related to Irish and Caribbean cultural experiences: (the impossibility of) sanctuary or refuge, wandering or errantry and (the inevitability of) exile. McGarrity's text can be compared to a kaleidoscope, in which the multi-coloured beads form one whole image once light enters it and reflects off its three mirrors. The image of the 'Gulf Stream' is revealing, and, together with the historic and geographic elements, it creates the beam of light that connects the different facets approached in this study of Irish and Caribbean modern literary works. The novelty presented in her work is the use of a historically contextualised 'geographic imaginary', the island imaginary, which determines both literary traditions.

Although the book is divided into four chapters and a conclusion, McGarrity is able to link the dense literary texts that she profoundly explores, and she manages well the transitions not only from one narrative text to the other,

but also from one chapter to the next. The outcome is a text with a flow that is a metaphor of the warm current of the Gulf Stream, described in mythology as 'a single, distinct, clear current' (p. 113), yet its actual course is dynamic and challenging.

In the Introduction the author warns the reader against what Foster calls 'the common pitfall of comparative postcolonial studies' (p.22) when juxtaposing two islands with different historical backgrounds. Though McGarrity charts with precision the shared experience of colonialism, she highlights the historical and cultural differences between Ireland and the Caribbean. The first chapter depicts the historical presence of the Irish in the Caribbean; the second deals with the common themes of transgressive sexuality and violated maternity in Irish Big House and Caribbean Plantation novels in Rhys, Somerville and Ross, Banville and Carpentier; the third is about the wandering of Joyce and Walcott in their epic geographies; and the fourth presents the connections between the Irish and the Caribbean *Bildungsroman* tradition (Joyce and Lamming) and the more

contemporary memoirs of diaspora (Kincaid and McCourt). The aim of the present review is to rethink the problematic of space – thoroughly present in McGarrity’s work – and how the authors of the selected novels create borders through which the centre is constantly being displaced.

Although space, as an aesthetic element, is recurrent in postcolonial literatures, critics have not taken into consideration how the process of creation is influenced by the locus of a work. As expressed by McGarrity’s quoting Benedict Anderson, the geographical space is commonly seen as ‘a state imposed grid for imagined communities’, and this grid is usually drawn to the benefit of those who have more power – the metropolitan centres in the case of Ireland and the Caribbean. *Washed by the Gulf Stream* subverts this idea of space by stating that, ‘Island geographies are imagined in and shape the consciousness of writers and peoples, for whom the Gulf Stream operates as a metaphor of geographic connection. This waterway reveals fundamental aspects of individual identity and collective cultural formation’ (23).

The first space that McGarrity explores is the domestic space, represented by the image of the house, in Irish Big House novels, such as *The Big House of Inver* (1925), by Somerville and Ross and *Birchwood* (1973), by Banville, and in Caribbean plantation novels, as *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), by Jean Rhys and *The Kingdom of this World* (1957), by Carpentier. Both forms of construction reveal luxury and ostentation on the outside, with high walls built in the latest European styles, so as to imitate the metropolis.

In “Of Other Spaces” (1967), Foucault expresses the idea of ‘heterotopias’ that are contrasted to utopias, for they are real places that are formed at the founding of a society. In Plantation and Big House novels, the physical space is represented by the Great House, whose grandiosity on the outside creates an image of strength; however, paradoxically, on the inside, these dwellings do not offer refuge. More specifically, the spaces represented by these houses can be considered, according to Foucault, as ‘crisis heterotopias’, that is, privileged or sacred places, reserved for

individuals who are in a state of crisis in relation to society, such as the falling of empire and of the aristocracy, in both Ireland and the Caribbean. Thus, the imagery of the Big House constitutes a way of life where the coloniser in the colonies mimics that of the British metropolitan powers, which results in juxtaposed times and places.

In Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1948), the image of the house illustrates how imagination works in the presence of shelter: it can either be a wall made of shadows that offer the illusion of protection, or physical shelter can be itself an illusion, when one doubts the protection provided by the thickest of walls. Therefore, in these literary genres, the walls do not offer refuge, so it becomes impossible to escape the tragic ending, common to the four novels. The monumental houses are literally destroyed by fire in Carpentier, Jean Rhys and Sommerville and Ross; however, in *Birchwood* it is Grandmother Godkin who ignites. According to McGarrity, ‘fire becomes an equalizing force, undermining distinctions based on race, class, and religion, rejoining seemingly disparate social groups’ (151). Due to the spatial limitations of the island, the novels share a common ending represented by the imagery of flight as the protagonists attempt to escape the decayed environment that encircles them.

Washed by the Gulf Stream also deals with geographical space, since it ‘operates in literature as a marker of cultural identity and as a means of association among what Europeans consider the margins, the former colonies themselves’ (19). Both Joyce, in *Ulysses* (1922) and Walcott, in *Omeros* (1990) remap their specific geographical sites in order to establish new centres and question the borders that separate land and sea, culture and identity. McGarrity challenges the relations between the centre and the margins, while stating that ‘The move to rethink margins and borders is clearly a move away from centralization with its associated concerns of origin, oneness and monumentality (...) as the center becomes a fiction’ (58). This implies that the boundaries between time, place and cultures no longer divide; they, instead, express continuity.

Mc Garrity mentions the way that Bhabha, in “How Newness Enters the World”, highlights the necessity to consider the ‘anxiety of the borderlines’ (137), which leads to the understanding of the *Bildungsromane* of Joyce, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and Lamming, *In The Castle of My Skin* (1953), and the succeeding memoirs by McCourt, *Angela’s Ashes* (1996) and Kincaid, *My Brother* (1997), all of which symbolise the fragmentation of cultures that arise through exile and emigration. In both genres, the *Bildungsromane* and the memoirs, the displacement of the protagonists is necessary in order to raise their awareness about their geographical surroundings and about the borders between centre and margin that are imposed by the imperial centres. In Joyce and Lamming awareness is raised once the protagonists return to their islands of origins, whereas in Kincaid and McCourt, the only way to escape the limiting island geography is to escape to America, and return becomes impossible.

McGarrity’s comparative analysis, which is based on the interface between fiction and what she calls ‘island imaginary’, provides a different perspective on the study of the aftermath of the demise of imperialism in Ireland and in the Caribbean. This review focuses on how the aesthetic element of space, present in the aforementioned selected postcolonial works, is subverted, as in the Irish Big House and

Caribbean Plantation novels, in which the domestic space no longer offers sanctuary or refuge. Moreover, the present analysis of *Washed by the Gulf Stream* concentrates on the geographic space and the way McGarrity deals with the constant displacement of the borderlines that existed between the centre and the margins, which suggests that, according to Linda Hutcheon, ‘To be ex-centric on the border or margin, inside yet outside is to have a different perspective’ (p 67). There is, therefore, a privileged point of view from both the inside and the outside, once the islands’ geographical limitations are overcome either by a return to the place of origin, or by definite escape from it.

Washed by the Gulf Stream is fundamental for readers who are interested in the cultural and historical relations between Ireland and the Caribbean. It is also aimed at students of postcolonial literatures as a whole and those who grapple with the displacement of borderlines and the problematic of space as an aesthetic element.

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Notes

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Author's Reply

The author accepts this Review and does not wish to comment further.

